

As Sir John Eliot Gardiner's new epic project sees him grapple with Brahms and his antecedents, the conductor tells Peter Quantrill that people frequently misunderstand both Brahms and himself

Two toads totally tired trying to trot to Tisbury, runs the nursery rhyme. I hope we didn't squash them, but it's hard to tell as the estate speeds from the station, dogs in the back licking my ear, and away through deepest Dorset. At the wheel, Isabella da Sabata points out local landmarks. One thickly wooded escarpment hides Madonna's house, apparently. All of a sudden, a field of mustard presents a bright yellow vista. In the farmhouse kitchen around the corner, Isabella's husband is keen to explain why. The idea, says Sir John Eliot Gardiner, is to plough the mustard back into the soil. This will release mustard gas, killing off weed roots, leaving the field ready for next year's wheat crop.

A musical analogy is too good to pass up, and Gardiner has fun pointing out the adverts in *Farmers' Weekly* that lamely appropriate musical terms for commercial kudos: trendy modern cereal and oil seed rape varieties include Allegro, Rhapsody, Vivace, Appassionata and Eroica. Will his new Brahms project uproot parasitic growths to reveal the symphonies standing tall? We'll see, with the release of only the second disc on his own label, Soli Deo Gloria (SDG), not to be devoted to the Bach Cantata Pilgrimage of 2000. Between 2007 and 2009 he is conducting 28 concerts of the four symphonies and the *German Requiem* in the context of their origins: Brahms's early choral works, going back to Mendelssohn, Beethoven and further, to Bach and Schütz. First of all, there is Brahms's old rival to confront.

We can all be funny about our pet hates, and Gardiner is good value on Wagner. "I really loathe Wagner – everything he stands for – and I don't even like his music very much." Pressed on why, and why he won't perform it: "It's like if you have a palate that you've developed over the years to distinguish between the best

Burgundy and Côtes du Rhone – then you're suddenly given this appalling Spätlese that's actually got a fair dose of paraffin in it as well, and sheep drench – I think your palate would be ruined. That's my fear."

We won't dwell on the monster of Bayreuth, then, but he inevitably rears his head from time to time, not least to shed light on why Gardiner "absolutely loves" Brahms. "With Wagner my concern, on a technical level, is the word setting and the lack of balance between the singers and the orchestra. But beyond that it's much more to do with the impact he had on the evolution of the orchestra. The density of texture looks to me irremediable. Brahms is very remediable. The only thing that needs to be remedied in Brahms's case is later performances, which do so often coagulate – the listener comes away with the feeling that Brahms is deadly earnest. I think Brahms's music is unbelievably shot through with transparency and radiance but it can get easily covered over."

He listens politely to my defence of Brahms the Protestant bourgeois in the *Haydn* Variations, where the composer is most obviously the son of his gauche, horn-playing father, especially in the defiantly sober orchestration of the opening chorale. "That's not my

approach to the piece at all. I approach it as dance, with *inégal* rhythms. There's a huge grace courtliness – it's not 'Rom pom-pom pom'. Later on it becomes more pompous. There is a sobriety about it but it also has a dance impulsion, which is often the case with Brahms. Just when you think 'God, he's getting heavy and serious' he will tickle your ear by varying the phrase structures – think of the fives and fours and sevens in the third movement of the First Symphony."

Certainly there is fun to be had from Brahms in the most unexpected places – such as the cheeky grace-note in the middle of the giant,



John Eliot Gardiner: loves Brahms, loathes Wagner

Finding his own path – in music and in business



"That's very
Beethovenian" –
Gardiner on the finale
of Brahms's First



Schützian fugue of the *German Requiem*'s third movement. "Yes, isn't it great? It's a swagger, a wiggle of his bottom, isn't it?" Even so, the protracted genesis of the First Symphony is written into its nature, just as Brahms burned tens of string quartets before carving out Op 51 No 1 – and in both genres the second example flows in the wake of the first – "the turd has passed!" Indeed. "Still, it's nothing like as anal as Bruckner – Bruckner's alimentary system was seriously challenged – but he felt huge pressure to get the First Symphony out of the way."

This is clear not only from the haunted chase of the first movement of Brahms' First, but the formal complexities of the finale. As Gardiner remarks: "That's very Beethovenian": not so much in its appropriation of the Sixth's storm to be subdued by a mountain horn-call, as in the Ninth's episodic, even polemical structure. But Brahms could have taken eight other, more coherent examples from Beethoven of how to write a symphonic finale. "No he couldn't, because he had a more precise sense of his own position in the genealogy of music than any composer since. It was very clear, starting with late renaissance polyphony and going through the Italian school and absorbing a lot of German folksongs and folksong settings, all of which he rifled through his own collection and conducted." There is the story of how the young Zemlinsky came to Brahms for a lesson. "He plonked a string quintet on the stand and asked for Brahms's comments and Brahms took it off and replaced it with Mozart's string quintets and said 'that's how it's done, from him to me'. Coming from anyone else it would sound preposterously conceited and arrogant, but Brahms was always being self-deprecating."

It sounds rather stifflingly self-conscious to me. "Well, wouldn't you be self-conscious if you'd had Wagner as a contemporary? There was Wagner blowing his beastly arrogant trumpet – saying that actually he was the one who was the new Beethoven." Gardiner shows how Brahms's setting of Goethe's *Schicksalslied* both answers Beethoven and paves the way for the First Symphony, as indeed he does on the new CD. "The use of the orchestra is very similar. It's an ABAB structure [like the finale of Brahms 1]. You have the groaning song and then the eruption of the heavens. This happens twice, and then when it goes back to the gods, they choose the spirit when it's young – and Brahms shuts the choir up for a purely orchestral peroration, which is so refined, beyond words. It's a polemic for the powers of abstract music, in the way that Berlioz's letters and symphonies, *Roméo* above all, are polemics – and Schumann's violin writing – in that intense early to middle Romantic, post-Beethovenian world, staking out the territory for orchestral music."

Taking advice from Berlioz and Brahms

We had been discussing Berlioz over lunch, and enthusing over *Benvenuto Cellini*, which Gardiner conducted in Zürich in 2002 and offered to Covent Garden – they turned him down – and remembering how he wept in rehearsal for *Les Troyens* in Paris, when he heard for the first time the massed blare of saxhorns, for which he had scoured Europe and finally discovered in the garret of a Parisian railwayman and brass enthusiast. So he shows me, with evident pride, seven original Berlioz letters that he has collected at auction

over the years. They are, of course, full of advice, spiked with scorn, on how to conduct his work.

Brahms was no less forthright on such matters, demolishing the efforts of the great names of his day – Levi, Richter, von Bülow – for pulling the symphonies about overmuch or treating them too rigidly. Gardiner has taken as a point of reference the notations that another conductor of the time, Fritz Steinbach, made of Brahms’s own phrasing when he worked on the symphonies with the court orchestra at Meiningen. Sir Charles Mackerras did the same some years ago, and while Gardiner is keen to acknowledge the older man’s savoir faire and “terrific influence”, he finds a certain freedom within Brahms’s markings that brings “an intrinsic vocality” to the phrase structures. “Not just his melodies but his counter-melodies and contrapuntal inner textures are incredibly sung, in a way that only Bach had achieved. You could argue that the best composers of the past 300 years have all written good viola parts – a real litmus test – starting with Monteverdi, going through Purcell, Rameau, then Mozart. Beethoven varies, Schumann varies. Brahms is superb.”

Rooting out the counterpoint exercises he did under the tutelage of Nadia Boulanger – now yellowing, taped corrections coming adrift – Gardiner shows me how “she made us write our harmony exercises on four different staves. What she was interested to know was not whether you got the harmony right but that every line was a singing melody in its own right – which was exactly how Bach taught. That’s what Brahms did supremely well, which I did supremely badly. So those two things – the Classical sense of the contour of the melody and the configuration of the phrase and the intrinsic vocality of the music – act as a wonderful purging, of density, thickness or turgidity. That’s what I’m aiming for anyway.” Refreshingly, he makes no tired insistence on an interpretative tabula rasa that wipes out most of the 20th century, but pays an intriguing

homage to the wartime recordings of Hermann Abendroth. Readers of Rob Cowan’s *Replay* pages in *Gramophone* will be familiar with Abendroth, who was (via Felix Mottl) a “grand-pupil” of Joseph Hellmesberger, Brahms’s steadfast chamber-music partner and adviser on matters violinistic.

Gardiner later insists that “at the moment of performance you chuck away the Steinbach and the treatises and all the scrupulous and miniscule attention to detail in the run-up to the rehearsals. There has to be a total engagement and deep emotion from everybody.” Even so, it seems to me that the intense preoccupation with such detail brings a sort of authority that allows only so much latitude.

While he is off being an amenable model for our photographer, he gives me free access to his rooftop study, two shelves of which groan with typescripts for a book on Bach that has been six years in the making, with another two to go. Squeezing amid the typed paragraphs, qualifications and amplifications vie for prominence, first in pencil then rewritten in ink. The pages erupt with the vigorous

polemicism of a Berlioz or Brahms that spills over into his conversation with an occasional abruptness engendered by the passionate need to communicate. I learn for myself that he doesn’t suffer fools gladly. He conducted Duruflé’s *Requiem* in July, with the Orchestre National de France in a rapt account at the Basilique de Saint-Denis, but then had to make do with the organ version at St James’s, Spanish Place when he brought it to London. I am a fan of the organ version: “Of course you are. Most English people are and that’s the only version they know. But I tell you, when you do it with orchestra, the colours are fabulous.”

At the same time, his Bach studies strike a very English sort of balance. He has harsh words for the Leipzig scholar Martin Petzold, who roots Bach squarely within a Lutheran context, and is sceptical of

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Gardiner: paying miniscule attention to detail

Essential Gardiner discs

Bach

Cantatas Vol 1
SDG SDG101

The first release in Gardiner’s 2000 Bach Cantata Pilgrimage, an extraordinary undertaking – a deeply moving experience that swept up the Record of the Year Award in 2005

Beethoven

Missa solemnis
DG 429 779-2

A disc that revealed Gardiner’s Beethoven credentials, but which also showed off his magnificent Monteverdi Choir as it edged into the 19th century. Another Record of the Year.

Chabrier

Orchestral works
DG 447 751-2GH

Gardiner the Francophile drawing playing of exquisite lightness and freshness from the Vienna Philharmonic. A disc of terrific charm and finesse.

Mozart

Idomeneo
Archiv 431 674-2AH3

The highlight of Gardiner’s cycle of the mature Mozart operas. Dramatically vivid with some magnificent performances from a superb cast. And with some thrilling playing by the English Baroque Soloists.

“Pilgrimage to Santiago”

SDG SDG701

Unaccompanied, the Monteverdi Choir goes back to its roots in a programme which harnesses scholarship and singing of breathtaking beauty.

Period-instrument conductor? I hate it. It's such a total falsity



others who would separate the music from the faith.

A recent paper by musician and academic Laurence Dreyfus observes some unsympathetic word-setting in “Ach mein Sinn” of the *St John Passion*; Gardiner wants to demonstrate how the instrumental outbursts and choppy vocal line are intrinsic to the expression of Peter’s anguish at having betrayed Jesus (the thrust of Dreyfus’s argument being that Bach privileges motif over meaning in this and other incidences). As he leaps up to show me both the score of another viciously tricky tenor aria in BWV81, and the recording of how “Paul Agnew really nails it”, it’s easy to believe him when he says that his Cantata Pilgrimage has entirely changed his approach to music and more besides. As SDG’s producer, Isabella de Sabata is in the throes of editing the latest volume of the pilgrimage on record, which includes No 101, *Nimm von uns*. We’re exclaiming over its polytonal opening chorus and 11-part counterpoint when Gardiner comes in again from the shoot. “Ah, this is extraordinary. But here, listen to the bass aria, it’s like Mahler.” And with a queasy, unprecedented shift from G minor into E major, it is.

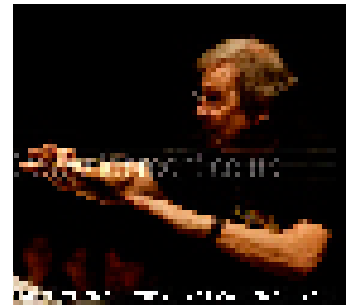
Back to Bach – of course

There is always more Bach in Gardiner’s schedule, and more work with the corps who form the English Baroque Soloists and Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique – what he describes as his “loopy” programmes for the last two concerts of the Brahms cycle, and a *Carmen* next spring with Anna Caterina Antonacci. What happens when he tries to bring principles of articulation to other orchestras, having honed them with his own bands for many years? “It’s much harder. It’s totally different. With the London Symphony Orchestra you’re dealing with a highly tuned, highly skilled, accomplished orchestra that is your willing accomplice in that if you give them clear direction they will take that direction and turn that in their own way into a fine performance.

“I was working with them on late-19th century romantic and 20th-century repertoire. We did *The Rake’s Progress*, the *Symphony of Psalms*, Lili Boulanger and all sorts of stuff. Look, they said, we’ve lost our way a bit in Beethoven. Can you come and give us a different appraisal and a different approach?”

This seems to me to collude with the image of the period-instrument conductor as musical physician, curing orchestral constipation with a stiff dose of organic rhythms. It’s an image that Gardiner is quick to dispel. The Archiv recordings for which he is best known worldwide, he acknowledges as “a big part of my middle period” but no more than that. Period-instrument conductor? “I hate it. It’s such a total falsity, because I didn’t come from there and it’s not what I do a lot of the time. I did my training as an apprentice conductor at the BBC Northern [now the BBC Philharmonic] where they took no prisoners at all. You were faced with an extremely accomplished but very hard-bitten orchestra who were fierce sight-readers. I would do the overtures in all the programmes, so I had a vast repertoire of overtures and was never given the duration of them to rehearse. If I had the *Academic Festival Overture*, which is 11 minutes long, I was given eight or nine minutes rehearsal. That doesn’t half concentrate the mind.”

Surely it gets easier. “The only thing that becomes easier is that people treat you slightly differently as you get older. You’re still only as good as your last rehearsal or concert. You have to make sure that you don’t screw up and you present your case as much as possible with the baton in the spirit of the moment – so they know they’re in safe hands.” That’s not not a nostrum that’s associated with period performance. “No. But I’m not a period performance boy at all.”



Gardiner takes nothing for granted: ‘You’re still only as good as your last rehearsal or concert.’

■ The first instalment of Gardiner’s Brahms series on SDG is reviewed on page 65