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An Interview with Charles Dutoit – “I want to enjoy a little less pressure and a bit more flexibility!”

Ben Hogwood | Sunday, November 28, 2010

Ben Hogwood talks to Charles Dutoit about his first recording with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra as its artistic director and reveals that he wishes for a little more time to spend with the London-based orchestra...

With such a sizeable legacy of digital recordings from the 1980s and 1990s, it has nonetheless been a while since Charles Dutoit entered the recording studio. This makes his new recording of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade* a return in many respects, not least because he recorded it for Decca in Montreal in 1984, but also because this new Onyx release (issued late-2010) also makes a new beginning, his first recording with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra as its Artistic Director.



As Charles Dutoit issues a cheerful greeting from his Philadelphia hotel, this is the first topic on the agenda. Has his view of the piece changed since making that 1984 recording of *Scheherazade*? “Of course, things change as you get older. Now we are making music in a different place, with a different orchestra. At the time of recording *Scheherazade* we were in the famous St Eustache Church in Montreal. We knew the strengths and the weaknesses of the venue, and were recording very fast. For this recording we were in Henry Wood Hall, which we know because we work there all the time”. Dutoit continues to enjoy Rimsky's colourful score. “It's wonderful, and so popular with the public because it is easy to hear, and easy to follow the story. The form is simple and straightforward with Rimsky-Korsakov, and there are beautiful colours. His talent is in orchestrating”.

Dutoit's mentor, Ernest Ansermet, recorded the work on several occasions. “I heard him conduct it when I was a kid, but I heard his records a long time ago when I was still in Montreal. He has been my mentor, and I feel very fortunate to know a man who was one of the conductors of the Ballets Russes. That period of my youth is very close to me, the repertoire from Rimsky-Korsakov to the 20th-century composers with the Ballets Russes. I am very proud to have received these traditions from Ernest Ansermet, who I followed in Geneva for seven years. He was never my teacher, but he was my mentor, and a fascinating person”.



Dutoit's relationship with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra is close on half-a-century. “These are my oldest friends in England”, he says warmly. “I kept the relationship from our first concert together in 1966, and since then we have given hundreds of concerts together. When they were looking for a replacement for Daniele Gatti as chief conductor I could not refuse. When we travel and play together there is such a nice atmosphere. Our activity in London may not be so big as with the other orchestras, but we do a lot of tours, and have residencies in China and in the Montreal festival”.

He acknowledges the changes in approach of the classical recording industry in that time. “The recording business is so much different to the 1980s, when there were thousands of records. Today the business is not so clear, and it's all online. This recording of Rimsky-Korsakov seals the relationship between the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and myself – but what we will do is very clear in my mind.” His plans in the concert hall are lucid.

“There are so many different things we will be doing. Next season we will play the three big Stravinsky ballets. It is a big time for the celebration of the Stravinsky ballets, with *The Firebird* written in 1910, *Petrushka* 1911, and *The Rite of Spring* 1912 to 1913. It means a real focus on life in Paris before World War One. So we play those, as well as Brahms, Shostakovich, Tchaikovsky and Elgar”.

Despite this focus on the centre of the orchestral repertoire, Dutoit claims a continued commitment to new music. “I have always been involved with living composers, and have given first performances of works by Tan Dun, Penderecki and James MacMillan recently – I love his music: we will be giving some concerts of the violin concerto. In previous times I was also involved with Denisov, and with Schnittke, and even in Paris, I was working with young composers from the very beginning of my musical life”.

The other ensemble with which Dutoit is most closely associated today is The Philadelphia Orchestra. "With them we will do another performance of *Les Troyens*, and I will be celebrating 30 years since my debut with them. I think now they have a new music conductor for the future" – announced as Yannick Nézet-Séguin – "he will create stability for them".

Dutoit continues to be loved by many ensembles across the Atlantic, but describes his links with modesty. "I will continue my relationship with Philadelphia, and I have a sustained relationship with Boston, San Francisco and Los Angeles orchestras". Perhaps not surprisingly, at the tender age of 74, he is now considering his moves a little more carefully. "I would like to slow down a little bit, though, so that I can be with the Royal Philharmonic, my oldest friends. I still remember my first concert 45 years ago, and I am so very happy to have a little more time for my friends in Europe, who I have neglected for the last couple of decades. I want to enjoy a little less pressure and a bit more flexibility!"
