

SIMON RATTLE — An Appraisal

Various contributors

An article in *The Observer* of the 25 August 2002 written by Kate Conolly and Amelia Hill highlights the appalling behaviour and megalomania of the conductor Simon Rattle.

I have been severely criticised for my comments about Rattle and felt that I was a voice in the wilderness.

My complaint is that he does not perform music as it is written. I have on CD and tape some 70 performances and I have the orchestral scores of each work. Not one of them complies with the various composers' intentions as clearly set out in the scores and, in most cases, Rattle does things which are completely at variance with the score. We don't hear Beethoven; we hear Rattle's Beethoven; we do not hear Mahler but Rattle's Mahler and, even allowing for the meaning of interpretation, what Rattle does with all of these scores is not a matter of interpretation but his saying that the composer made mistakes and he is correcting them. He is eccentric and does great disservice to all the music I have heard him conduct. Being eccentric is not wrong in itself, but when it is displayed as abuse and misuse of the music then that eccentricity is a crime against the composers themselves and musical integrity.

The correct definition of interpretation is to realise as exactly as possible what the composer has written. It is the same as the verb "to translate" and so 'Parlez vous francais?' does not mean 'I wish that I could speak French' although there may be a similarity of thought between that and its correct interpretation 'Do you speak French?'

One of Rattle's many other terrible indiscretions is caricature which, incidentally the writers in *The Observer* complain about. And so it shows that others realise what an abuser of music he is and, like myself, are prepared to say so. For example, in his hideous recording of Walton's *Symphony no. 1*, every sforzando is over emphasised as caricature and makes the music banal. It is Rattle's Elgarian pomp and arrogance by which he has to put his stamp on everything he does. It is not the composer that is important or has the last word. It is Rattle.

To watch him conduct is painful, embarrassing and exceptionally annoying. In a performance of Beethoven's *Choral Symphony* from Ely Cathedral he was guilty of the most appalling things. At one stage he put one hand on his hip and with the other flicked his wrist downwards with a stupid expression on his face as if he were effeminate or gay. What has that gone to do with Beethoven or Schiller? He makes the most horrible faces at times and, even allowing for strange facial expressions that conductors do make, his were so grotesque that they surpassed all other contortions. He has been named him *The Grotesque Gesturer of the Podium*.

He performed Beethoven's *Choral Symphony* at a concentration camp saying that Schiller's words were all about freedom and this is what Beethoven had in mind when he set this text. The poet's words are about joy. But, of course, Rattle knows best and far more than anyone else!

His recent CD of Beethoven's *Symphony no. 5* is a travesty. He puts in rests that do not exist; he changes the tempi and, often, the music does not sound like Beethoven at all. The first bars are wrong!

When he was about to conduct Mahler's *Eight* at the 2002 Proms he implied that the spirituality of the music shows that salvation is possible through Goethe. Such an unbelievably stupid remark that I had to play it back several times.

Well, Rattle, if you are right it saves Almighty God from responsibility and, for the Muslims, it relieves Allah of all responsibility as well.

The Mahler was a ghastly performance. The instrumentation was not as Mahler indicated and, at one stage, Rattle got the children's choirs to sing with their cupped hands each side of their mouths as if they were calling out to a friend across a playground. This is not in my score and totally unjustified as it would have been had the older members of the choir took their teeth out! The tempi in the performance were all over the place.

Many conductors sing along with the choral parts. Rattle did in this Mahler performance but, by observing the shape of his mouth, he was always singing different words.



When Rattle conducted Mahler's Symphony no. 2 at Symphony Hall, Birmingham in 2000 he introduced more vulgar, pseudo-gimmicks. He instructed the choir to sit and sing for much of the time and some had to have one hand on each of their knees and some men had to sit with their knees apart with their hands clasped between them as if they were nervously waiting for a prostate inspection. Then Rattle instructed the choir to stand for the final minutes.

The Observer's article refers to a recent verbal assault by Rattle against British culture and therefore against Britain itself, the very country of his birth and which has enabled him to reach the elevated position he has and given him a knighthood.

He criticised British Art and had a severe knock at artists like Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin. Excuse me, Mr Rattle, you are not an expert on art. If you are tell me how the Dutch Protestant painter Vermeer made his paints in the late seventeenth century? Did he go to Woolworths?

This conductor says that British art is bullshit. What has the excrement of a male bovine got to do with art?

Rattle also said of British art, "It is only made by parasites for the rich."

On a Channel Four news programme, Rattle said that his remarks were misunderstood. Nonetheless, he came across again as very vain and arrogant and he was plastered with makeup.

He packed his bags and went off to conduct and take charge of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra in 2002 which, for many years, was presided over by another pompous, arrogant melogamaniac named Herbert von Karajan. One recalls those films, now videos, produced and directed by Karajan in which he conducted Beethoven and most of the shots were of him close up. You could count the hairs up his left nostril! I will never forgive Karajan for his recording of Sibelius 's Symphony no, 4 which was so awful that I cannot erase it from my memory and, through no fault of mine, I cannot now enjoy the piece.

Rattle said that although Berlin was culturally bankrupt and that he would rather work elsewhere than in Britain.

As others have rightly said, "We don't need Rattle in this country. We hope he never comes back."

But what concerns me is why some people think he is so wonderful. Yet, having said that, the professionals don't think so. It is the sincere but uninformed music lovers that adore him.

Only ignorance welcomes imposters !

Some years ago in Birmingham he gave a series of concerts of the music of Szymanowski which I followed with the scores. Rattle totally ignored many of the composer's instructions. Several passages marked non rall (do not slow down) he did slow down and other passages marked poco accel (a little quickening) he ignored. I could many other examples of his mistakes (legions of them, in fact) and his disregard for the composer.

I have friends who have played under his baton who because of their professionalism will not wish to be named but they all say the same thing, "Is he bad or is he mad?"

In Berlin he began by earning £500,000 a year.

What a price to pay to someone who abuses music... the butcher of Beethoven, the murderer of Mahler, the assassin of Szymanowski..... and the rest!

And on his opening night with the Berlin Philharmonic, he performed Mahler's Symphony no. 5. At one stage he made the solo horn come to the front of the podium to play his solo. This is not authorised by Mahler in the score. Mahler allowed soloists to stand up in the orchestra but never to come to the front and I know of no other conductor who has done this.. It was another gimmick and totally absurd. It did not add anything to his pedestrian performance and gave a false impression

This example of standing up or coming to the front was taken up by the big bands such as Benny Goodman's band and that of Glenn Miller.

I have heard from many prominent soloists who all say that Rattle is impossible to work with. He is a megalomaniac in the Elgar/Britten tradition and things have to be done his way. Many have said that he is a very unpleasant and hateful man and when you read what he says about British music and British orchestras, the case is proved.

Rattle should know that his job is to perform what is written and how it is written. Interpretation means to realise as close as possible what the composer has put on paper.

He was born in Liverpool on 19 January 1955 and attended Liverpool College and RAM. In 1974 he became the assistant conductor of the Bournemouth SO and was made a CBE. In 1977, he became assistant

conductor to the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic. He took on the City of Birmingham SO in 1980 where he stayed until 1998. He took over from very different conductors who were excellent such as Hugo Rignold and Louis Fremaux. In 1994 Rattle was made a Knight Bachelor. He then was outspoken and abusive about music in Britain and in 2002 took over the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra.

His private life has been a mess. He married the American soprano, Elise Ross, in 1980 and they were divorced in 1995. His second wife was Candace Allen, a writer from Boston. This marriage was ended when it was discovered that he was having an affair with the Czech mezzo Magdelean Kozena with whom they have had two sons. Her marriage to the French baritone Vincent le Tezier also broke up because of this illicit affair.

He is a dreadful show off, does not perform music as it is written and makes fun of it. In his recording of Haydn's Symphony no. 90, a glorious work, he made gestures to the audiences making them hoot and laugh and this is not the way to treat a great composer.

To quote a very great musician, "Vanity does not make a good conductor!"

Because this article is on my site, it does not mean that I necessarily agree with all the points expressed.

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