

Mr Chancellor

Being fascinated by Northumbrian wild-life, I know you will be interested to hear about the frequent sightings of a curious non-indigenous aquatic mammal just off the north east coast. Locals have been aware of this marine visitor for about a decade. Usually seen early in the morning, after first light, it swims parallel to the shoreline, bobbing in and out of the breakers, just off the beach at Low Newton-on-the-Sea. Its bears some similarity to the grey seal: about the same size, cautiously curious of strangers, and a creature of habit. However, unlike the grey seal, its visits are intermittent and, at first, thought to be unpredictable. In fact, it can only be seen for six weeks a year, sometimes in spring, sometimes in winter.

This strange annual pattern does not depend on the weather, nor on the sea temperature – and the visitor can be seen come sunshine, rain or snow. However, rather curiously, for the last twelve years, the sightings have coincided with the very best performances of the world-renowned Northern Sinfonia. Not surprisingly, it has taken our biologists some time to understand why this is the case. Mr Chancellor, if you are fortunate to catch a glimpse, then I urge you to be patient, because after an hour or so, an explanation will emerge from the deep.

For the last 12 years, Thomas Zehetmair has been Music Director of the Northern Sinfonia, based at the Sage in Gateshead. During this time he has taken the orchestra on a musical journey, moving to unanticipated new heights, inspiring audiences around the world with his fresh interpretation of both new repertoire and the “classical golden oldies”. He seems to have extraordinary energy and vigour for music.....it will therefore come as no

surprise to you that he is the Austrian-aquatic who begins each day with a bracing deep-sea dip.

Born into a musical family in Salzburg, Thomas studied violin with his father at the Mozarteum, and first hit the stage in 1977 at 16 years of age, at the world-renowned Salzburg festival. Widely regarded as one the most significant violinists of his generation, he has played with the greatest, including Daniel Barenboim, Nicholas Harnoncourt, and Sir Simon Rattle; and remains a regular guest of the most renowned European and American orchestras, including the Royal Concertgebouw of Amsterdam, and the Chicago Symphony. Despite his classical upbringing, he is a champion of contemporary music, always ready to take on a new challenge, and commissioning countless new pieces from modern composers, including Heinz Holliger, which he has recently recorded.

Building on his successful solo career, in 1994 he formed the Zehetmair String Quartet, which includes his wife Ruth, who is with us today. The quartet stands out from the crowd in several respects. Quite remarkably, the four play entirely from memory. This approach lifts the music off the page, allowing the quartet to connect perfectly with one another, delivering an ethereal quality that transcends the concert hall. Indeed, despite, an annual global tour of famous establishments, I do not think that the actual venue is at all important for the experience. Let me just illustrate this.

Since taking up residence at Newton, Thomas has become an integral part of the local community, getting to know the locals through visits to “The Ship” inn. After one intense home rehearsal, the quartet popped in for a drink, and, discussing their day’s work over the bar, the landlady asked if they would perform. Unable to resist the chance to play in front of a new and discerning audience, the concert was arranged for later that week. Imagine the scenario,

a world-class string quartet playing to 30 Northumbrian farmers, crammed into a ramshackle corrugated iron hall, immersed in the atonal intensity of Bartok. It was a surreal, but deeply rewarding experience for all.

Unperturbed by this, the quartet embarked on a tour of Northumbrian Churches. Now, as you know Mr Chancellor, these magnificent buildings are not well lit, and are usually damp and cold. This is not a good environment for complex chamber music, and so, on one occasion, several electric heaters were collected together to address the problem just before the performance.

Unfortunately, the power requirements out-stripped the local supply. Plugging them in fused the lights, and not only in the church, but throughout the whole village. What should they do? Could the performance go ahead in the pitch-black? Unruffled, Thomas asked all the local cyclists to pop outside and remove their lamps. So the performance went ahead as planned “by torch and candle light”.

Mr Chancellor, if you will forgive the pun, I think these two anecdotes do “cast light” on the real character of Thomas Zehetmair. He has a very intense, and deep relationship with music, which seems to transcend the physical world. This is clearly apparent in his solo performances, which have a celestial quality. But although he might seem to be in another universe, this is far from the case. Only by directly connecting with the “musical soul” of each member of the quartet, can he capture the moment, and shape the sound onto a higher plane. His approach therefore has a very human quality, with a direct, almost palpable connection to each player.

And it was exactly these qualities that he displayed during his debut performance at Newcastle-Gateshead, directing the Northern Sinfonia as lead violin in the (rather tricky) Mendelssohn violin concerto. Immediately after, he

was asked to conduct a Schubert symphony later in the season – a major challenge for his debut as a conductor. However, I think that both he and the orchestra were in the right place at the right time. A receptive, open chamber orchestra, keen to improve, the Sinfonia was ready to engage with a new musical director and chief conductor, who was extending the skills he developed with his quartet. Both conductor and orchestra embarked on a musical journey, each one learning from the other. This journey of discovery continues to the present day.

So what is like being under his direction at the Northern Sinfonia? Well, Thomas Zehetmair is inspirational, but described with huge warmth. He has a remarkable ability to connect with each individual member of the orchestra, almost simultaneously it seems. He approaches the repertoire after detailed academic research – not just the annotated original scores, but the history of the piece, the state of mind of the composer, and the cultural context. He brings this deep understanding into the rehearsal hall, and shares his infectious enthusiasm with the players. He has an almost forensic interest in how the music should be performed – but facilitates the expression of musicianship by each artist, yoking their talent together in a common direction that is intensely expressive. In this way he breaths new life into old music, playing all-too-familiar Beethoven symphonies as if the ink were still wet on the page, intermingled with the baroque and contemporary repertoire. In the words of one of his colleagues, “Thomas could conduct the Gateshead telephone directory as if it were a musical masterpiece”. And under his direction, the Northern Sinfonia has firmly established itself a leading orchestra on the international stage, touring widely, whilst building an impressive catalogue of recordings.

Of course, all of this implies a certain “other worldliness”, a disconnect from reality. But nothing could be further from the truth. I suspect that the early morning swims keep him “grounded” in the physical world, and he loves all things English – the language, the culture, and the humour. He finds Fawlty Towers hilarious, and is an avid follower of Father Ted.

Mr Chancellor, Thomas Zehetmair has received widespread international recognition for his work, including an Honorary Doctorate from the Music Academy of Franz list in Weimar, the “Karl-B öhm Interpretation Award” from his native Austria, and several prizes for his recordings, including Gramophone record of the year, and “Diapason d’Or de l’Annee”. We are extremely fortunate that Thomas Zehetmair sees the north east of England as one of his homes. He has made an extraordinary contribution to our regional musical culture, and with the Northern Sinfonia, has been an ambassador for our region throughout the world. I therefore ask that you award him the degree of *Doctor of Music, honoris causa*.

Citation by Professor Patrick Chinnery

12 July 2012