

FT-FINANCIAL TIME Gardiner Interview vom 15.01.2010

Lunch with the FT: John Eliot Gardiner

By Andrew Clark

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A few days before I meet the conductor Sir John Eliot Gardiner, a text message gives me some idea what to expect. “Just checking if you have anything against venison and/or liver? Will be an entirely homegrown lunch and we have plenty of spare wellies. You may want to wear mud-friendly clothes.”

The sender is his Italian wife Isabella, who is acting as go-between. For Gardiner, squeezing a Lunch with the FT into his next run of rehearsals in London is evidently less convenient than having me visit the farm he owns in south-west England.

But then Gardiner, 66, spends most of his time in metropolitan concert halls, so I can't blame him for wanting to hunker down at home. Away from the podium, he has 130 head of cattle and 500 acres of woodland to occupy his mind. He has also been trying to finish a book about Johann Sebastian Bach. Gardiner knows as much about the baroque composer as anyone, having spent the millennium year performing

Bach's 200 surviving cantatas in cathedrals and churches all over Europe.

EDITOR'S CHOICE

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He has also been a key figure in transforming the way we listen to music of the past. While studying history at Cambridge University in the early 1960s, he founded the Monteverdi Choir and set about challenging established ideas about music of the 17th and 18th centuries. Composers such as Bach and Monteverdi had long been neglected, misunderstood or else performed in the same style, and with the same instruments, as music of the romantic and modern eras.

Peeling back the layers of tradition, Gardiner and other radicals, such as Nikolaus Harnoncourt and Roger Norrington, began to use instruments and playing techniques that were modelled as closely as possible on those used at the time of composition. The revolution they initiated became known as the "period instrument" or "early music" movement. It involved extensive scholarship and research but was adapted to modern auditoria and performing conditions.

The results, slimmer in sound, lighter in texture and more quick-footed than traditional performances, were often revelatory – so much so that, by the late 1990s, Gardiner was fast becoming the establishment. He began to conduct such bastions of conservatism as the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra. Over the next month he will take a programme of Beethoven symphonies round Europe with the London Symphony Orchestra – another ensemble that had long been regarded as resistant to "period" ideas and techniques.

Gardiner continues to stake out new ground with his choir and two freelance bands, the English Baroque Soloists and the Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique. Having exhausted the richest seams of baroque music, they have moved into the 19th century. Judging by the CDs I have heard, however, their recent forays into Brahms have been nothing like as successful – a sign that the period instrument movement may not have the key to every musical box.

All this suggests Gardiner and I will have plenty to chew over at the lunch table. But when Isabella picks me up from the railway station and drives me the short distance to Gore Farm, deep in the Dorset countryside, I realise there will be more than music on the menu. The brick and flint house, a rambling former stables, sits in glorious seclusion. On one side lies a wood where deer and other wildlife roam; on the other there's a kitchen garden and a pair of modern barns. Each of these, I discover, has provided ingredients for our meal. In between, a vista extends 40km south towards the Purbeck hills.

The door opens and a pack of Golden Retrievers rushes out. A couple of minutes later Gardiner himself bursts into view, an imposing figure in brown corduroy trousers, warm check shirt and green pullover – comfortable old clothes that make few concessions to the outside world. There are no formalities. "Do *you* think this is by Bach?" he asks, thrusting into my hand the score of a concerto for harpsichord, flute and violin, with Bach's name on the title page, which he recorded some years ago. "It's full of rococo twiddles, which Bach can do but I've been listening again and I think there's something fishy about it."

Gardiner exudes an air of command. This can be useful when questioning the authenticity of Bach manuscripts or rehearsing an orchestra of 60 musicians, and I can't help wondering whether it has influenced the design of his home. The dominating feature, out of all proportion to the rest, is his study – a conical eyrie with wooden frames and watch-tower windows, dwarfing its surroundings.

But there is no time to discuss Bach, admire the view or examine the composer autographs on the wall. Gardiner is impatient to show off his farm. So we boot-up and take a quick tour, leaving Isabella at the Aga. Gardiner, the son of a farmer and nephew of the composer Henry Balfour Gardiner, was born and brought up on this soil. He inherited a modest portion of the land – his elder brother got the lion's share, which was later sold – and over the years spent as much as he could afford acquiring the rest. Approaching a gaggle of grumpy geese – “Don't they make the most unmusical noise?” – he seems every inch the English squire.

As he drives me round his domain, it is evident that he likes to be in control – whether it be his own farmyard, his own opera productions or his own CD company, which Isabella, a former recording executive, runs for him. That may explain why he has never held a position with a conventional orchestra or opera company for long. Musicians accustomed to democratic structures are turned off by his exacting standards and a dictatorial style that has bordered on rudeness in the past.

When I ask him about this, he replies: “Can I protest my innocence? I can be impatient, I get stroppy, I haven't always been compassionate. I made plenty of mistakes in my early years. But I don't think I behaved anything like as heinously as you have heard. The way an orchestra is set up is undemocratic. Someone needs to be in charge.”

Today, he is all bonhomie. He gives a friendly wave to one farm worker, chats with another and pushes a clump of silage in the direction of my nose. “Smell it – very sweet. If I were a cow I'd eat it. They look well on it.”

Indeed they do. Gardiner's Aubrac cattle, doe-eyed animals originating from France, are housed in barns with musical names (*The Merry Widow*, *Benvenuto Cellini*), signifying opera productions he conducted, the fees for which covered his building costs. There is another musical connection – a shed, used in the late 1930s by a Silesian refugee who gave Gardiner's father a famous portrait of Bach for safe-keeping, now rented to a maker of harpsichords, an instrument central to Bach's musical armoury. “How's that for poetic justice? So there's a kind of synergy between music and forestry.”

Back in the kitchen, we are welcomed by the sight of homemade bread, a bolognaise sauce (those poor Aubracs) and raspberries from the garden. Displacing Isabella at the stove, Gardiner says: “I'm not as good a cook as my wife. She's the domestic goddess.” He then complains that she has not cut the liver thin enough (Isabella is his second wife – he has three daughters by his first, violinist Elizabeth Wilcock).

He pours me a glass of red wine and proffers an appetiser of sliced chorizo – the only part of the menu not from Gore Farm. Its pedigree is, nonetheless, impressive: it was a gift from the Prince of Wales. “He dropped it in en route to Poundbury [the prince's anti-modernist urban development near Dorchester]. We have quite a lot to

talk about, what with organic farming and his love of music.”

You can't blame Gardiner for name-dropping when his ensembles are so dependent on private patronage: donors are usually attracted by royal connections. I am eager to get back to Bach – but no sooner have we settled at the dining room table, and started our venison liver with gratin of leeks and black cabbage, than he rants about the travails of country life.

“It's very difficult to make things pay. There are no tax breaks for forestry – you're talking two to three generations [to grow timber]. It's not a quick return. Maintenance is a huge thing – thinning the trees on a regular cycle, protecting against deer.”

The very deer that we are eating, I assume. So why bother, when music provides more than enough stimulation? Gardiner passes me some of Isabella's delicious bread and pauses. “This farm is not a hobby. Music and farming are equal pillars – I couldn't do one without the other. It's just that pressure on the countryside is getting worse. There's a huge culture of ignorance – for example, about how healthy food is produced.”

Isabella exchanges our antipasto plates for tagliatelle bolognaise, leaving Gardiner to reel off his *bêtes noires*. Climate change, supermarkets and urban dwellers head the list. I ask him why farmers can't defend their interests more effectively.

“Unlike [the farm lobby in] France, we're not powerful enough,” he snorts. “We've been marginalised. It's all to do with governments misunderstanding the health needs of the community.”

Let's get back to the music, I suggest – but here too Gardiner feels marginalised. His choir and orchestras derive most of their income from outside the UK, he explains. In other countries, “You don't find the dislocation of sensibility between wealth and high culture that you get in Britain”.

Does he mean rich people in the UK take a less educated interest in the arts than their French or Italian counterparts? No, he says, but the relationship between art and money is more complicated in Britain. “The wealthy in this country enjoy the social cachet [of the performing arts] but they prefer the anonymity of darkened theatres, where social mores are not exposed. That's why they gravitate more to Covent Garden and Glyndebourne than to concert halls.”

Gardiner believes this “dislocation of sensibility” is not just a legacy of Britain's complex social history – it's as much the fault of government agencies, who failed to provide decent concert halls. “We just don't get it right here. The Royal Festival Hall is one of the most unsympathetic places for classical music I have seen, closely followed by the Barbican. The problem is, we musicians ain't listened to.”

Were musicians any better off in centuries past? While I'm struggling with my generous portion of tagliatelle, Isabella comes to the rescue with a palate-cleansing salad. I realise this is as good a chance as I'll get to steer conversation back to Bach.

Gardiner responds on cue. “Bach was like a shuttlecock, going from municipal

employ and the consistory of the Church on one side, to aristocratic patronage on the other. He got on better with aristocratic patrons, maybe because as a child of his time he accepted the social hierarchy. But when he fell out with his employer, as he did in Weimar in 1707, he ended up in prison. Bach must have said something pretty cheeky to Duke Wilhelm Ernst, who impounded a lot of music he had written. There was a fire in the ducal palace in the 1770s and the music was gone for ever.”

It sounds as if Bach’s relationship with his backers was considerably more precarious than Gardiner’s. That may be so, he says, as a raspberry dessert appears, but musicians today are as socially dispensable as in the baroque era. “Musicians exist to be indulged – preferably the infant prodigy, like Mozart, or an old man who can do no wrong like [Otto] Klemperer [a veteran German conductor, lionised in London in the 1960s]. Musical performance has become a spectator sport: the more virtuosic you are, the more applauded you are. Like an athlete or gymnast.”

I have to catch the afternoon train back to London. Lunch has lurched so unpredictably between farm-life and musical life that I feel it’s time to draw the threads together and see if they meet. As an entrepreneur in both the musical and agricultural fields, does Gardiner see any link between leadership in music and leadership in business?

“I don’t take a bonus,” he says, referring to the fuss over bankers’ pay. “In fact, it works the other way – I have to shell out if the thing burns out. A leader is someone who carries the can and, if necessary, shovels the shit – someone with vision, energy, enthusiasm, the ability to inspire people to give of their best. Not because they are cowed into doing it but because they are empowered to do it.”

I’m impressed by this impromptu solo: Gardiner knows how to cut to the quick. “That’s what I find thrilling about my two bands – it’s ‘everybody in it together’. They all know their role in the totality and feel passionate, in a proselytising way, about winning new listeners. You’ve really got to believe in what you’re doing. There’s an evangelical thread to it all.”

This last remark comes with the same thrusting self-confidence that accompanied his handshake two and a half hours earlier, when he marched me round his farm.

It’s past time to go. Isabella whisks me back to the station, leaving Gardiner surveying his panoramic eyrie with Bach.

John Eliot Gardiner’s Beethoven tour with the London Symphony Orchestra begins in Lisbon on January 26 and ends at the Barbican, London, on February 9

Andrew Clark is the FT’s chief music critic

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John Eliot Gardiner’s farm Dorset, England

Venison liver x 2 Tagliatelle bolognaise x 2 Mixed salad x 2 Raspberries x 2 Mongrana 2006 x 2 glasses

Total No charge

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Andrew Clark on pioneering period performances



Gardiner at the Proms

The period instrument movement, of which Sir John Eliot Gardiner is a leading light, has been the single most influential force on the creative side of classical music since the postwar modernism of Boulez and Stockhausen.

It opened up a new repertoire, ranging as far back as 12th-century composer Hildegard von Bingen and as far away as the 18th-century South American mission churches, where the interaction between European tradition and Latin American soul left a rich but long-hidden legacy.

Misconceptions persist. The period movement was initially dismissed as a sandal-wearing, yoghurt-eating fringe. It later gave oxygen to second-rate performers who aped the tempi and technical mannerisms of the movement's pioneers but lacked their musical judgment and scholarly hinterland.

Even today many music lovers assume that period performance aims to provide an exact replica of what composers of the 17th and 18th century heard. Gardiner and his colleagues claim no such thing: they realise no one can know exactly what Bach or Monteverdi meant. The bare markings in a score are only a guide. The fact that interpretations differ so wildly shows how open the field is. Period performance is more an attitude of mind than a rulebook. It means questioning inherited practice and studying manuscripts and contemporary accounts for hints about styles and techniques.

One example was Sir Charles Mackerras's recent discovery in Prague of details in the autograph score of Antonín Dvorák's popular New World Symphony that were at odds with established practice. Mackerras immediately tried it out with the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra.

Over the past decade there has been a blurring of lines between period performance and the musical mainstream, suggesting it is one more fashion in the evolution of classical music. Gardiner admits that "our grandchildren will think what we've been doing is quaint". The question is: what will be the next fashion?

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