



BELGIAN
NATIONAL ORCHESTRA

MAKING MUSIC IS BALM TO THE SOUL

Chief conductor Hugh Wolff, whose home base is in Boston, was stuck in the US for a long time due to the present health crisis. Recently, however, he was able to return to Belgium to record a radio concert with the Belgian National Orchestra. So how have these times been for him? Time for a chat!

In March 2020, concert life came to a sudden halt. How did you deal with the situation?

For me the sudden lockdown came as a huge shock. To think that just a few weeks previously we had been performing Beethoven's Missa Solemnis with a huge choir... Of course we can also count ourselves lucky that we have had no tragedies within our own ranks! Like everyone else, I thought that we would soon be starting up again, but now here we are almost a year down the line. We have had to constantly adjust our expectations. The things we used to simply take for granted are no longer possible, and that is a very humbling experience.

In Europe, with the various support measures for the culture sector, we are in a position of relative luxury. Whereas the stories circulating about the culture sector in the US are very worrying...

That is true. As the vast majority of cultural institutions are privately financed in the US, we are seeing some dreadful situations. One extreme example is the Metropolitan Opera in New York. All performances for this season have been cancelled and the members of the orchestra receive no compensation for unemployment. So the situation in America is exceptionally tough. We are fortunate that the Belgian National Orchestra can take some shelter under the federal government umbrella. Which does not mean to say that the situation here is not also very worrying: It will take a long time to restore the connection with the public that we had built up so meticulously over the years.

Are online concerts and radio broadcasts a solution in these times?

One big advantage of such initiatives is that they provide a way for us to remain in people's consciousness. They make people look forward to the time when live concerts return. Online presentations will also become very important in the future, especially as a means of reaching young people. But one must not underestimate just how difficult such concerts are: to give a quality musical performance with plexiglass panels, masks and instrumentalists distanced from each other is a real challenge!



For many people, these past months have been a time for contemplation and reflection. For you too?

Normally, I am constantly on the move and never at home. Recent months – and I know this might sound crazy when speaking of a time of crisis – have therefore been an oasis of calm and rest for me. Two of my three sons who live in New York City fled the city and spent the time at the family home. My wife and I spent the summer with them. Taking walks together, cooking, eating, talking about all kinds of things... I also started playing the piano every day again, something I had not done for 15 years.



Back in Belgium there was then immediately the fire at BOZAR...

A tragedy! Fortunately, there is a lot of solidarity in the orchestra world. In the coming months, the Belgian National Orchestra will be warmly welcomed at a number of concert halls. The radio concert that I conduct will be recorded at the Munt, for example. On one hand, it will be a major challenge to adapt to the acoustics of this hall and to observe all the measures that currently apply. On the other hand, the score that will be on our lecterns, Schumann's Symphony No. 2, makes you forget everything else. As soon as you start playing, the world melts away and you are focused completely and solely on a passionate understanding, a deep reading of this fantastic work.

The radio concert programme also includes Beethoven's Fidelio Overture and Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 24.

An overture, a concerto and a symphony: at first glance that may not seem a particularly exciting programme, but nothing could be further from the truth. The whole idea of oppression, dreaming of a better world and, finally, also salvation is captured by Beethoven in just six minutes in his fantastic Fidelio Overture. As for the Piano Concerto No. 24, this is one of Mozart's darkest and most passionate works. It is both exceptionally introspective and exceptionally aggressive. Richard Egarr, the soloist, and myself never cease to be surprised by the complexity of this work. My absolute favourite, however, is Schumann's Symphony No. 2. It is a work full of quotations from Bach, Haydn, Beethoven and others. A retrospective of the entire history of music! In the fourth movement, Schumann's music comes to a sudden and quite depressing standstill. How, after a giant such as Beethoven, to go further? Out of nothing he begins at that moment something new, something never heard before. Symphonies such as Beethoven's Fifth and Ninth are full of masculine aggression. Meanwhile, Schumann shows us another path: he does reach heaven, not fighting but through love. For me, that is the idea at the heart of his Symphony No. 2. Buckling under the weight of history, Schumann collapses. But he manages to get back on his feet and to develop something completely different. It is a path that we as humankind must also take today, at both the macro and the micro level. In this way, the Symphony No. 2 offers inspiration for dealing with the pandemic, for engaging in politics and for one's personal life. Certainly, the theme of depression, or rather the leaving behind of depression, is exceptionally relevant in times such as these when more and more people are struggling to see a light at the end of the tunnel.

What things offer you hope today?

Playing music together. The moment I stand in front of an orchestra I am able to set aside all the suffering and the pain in the world. Playing music is balm to the soul. I regard creating beauty as an exceptional privilege, especially in times when beauty is in short supply.