

Dutch courage

The Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra will be trying to impress London audiences next week - Jessica Duchen went to Amsterdam to talk to their irrepressible Italian conductor, Riccardo Chailly

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The Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra came into being in 1888, the same year as its home, Amsterdam's premier concert hall, from which the orchestra takes its name. Since then, it has built up a worldwide reputation, not least for its traditionally distinctive sound, with silky strings and rich, intense woodwind tone. It is an impressive tradition, and the question of how to maintain that tradition while also ensuring fresh thinking and creative programming is inevitably among the most important tasks facing the orchestra's chief conductor.

For that job, you need a lot of energy. And the energy level of the Italian maestro Riccardo Chailly, who took over from Bernard Haitink as chief conductor in 1988, first becomes evident to me when our interview is arranged for the morning after the opening concert of the Concertgebouw season, at an hour when any other musician would probably still be sleeping off the after-effects of performing a Mahler symphony - a task which Chailly describes as the musical equivalent of climbing the Himalayas.

Now in his mid-40s, Chailly is a warm, genial, extrovert character, in contrast to the idea of the conductor as fierce despot. "What I like to establish in rehearsal is a natural discipline," he explains in his airy canalside apartment. "I hate tension - with tension I cannot make music - but I also hate chaos. It should be a natural discipline, discipline with serenity."

Believing staunchly in the value of long-term relationships between orchestra and conductor, he spends five months of every musical season with the Concertgebouw Orchestra. He now divides his remaining time between becoming, from this season onwards, music director of a young orchestra in Italy, the Orchestra Sinfonica di Milano Giuseppe Verdi, and increasingly selective guest conducting, which includes regular appearances with the London Symphony Orchestra.

After 11 years together, this conductor and the Concertgebouw players are bound to know one another's ways. "I used to talk a lot in the rehearsals in the beginning," says Chailly, "but the more time passes the more we know each other, and now much more effective is a look, a movement of the hand, a movement of a finger; one point is enough when the knowledge between you is so strong." He agrees that this can make life harder when he guest-conducts other orchestras. "I have to watch out! I am so used to working with this orchestra, which knows me so well that I can sometimes let things run with the chemistry - there can be gestures that the Concertgebouw Orchestra would pick up immediately, but another orchestra might not. So technical questions have to be adjusted a little."

Next Wednesday, Chailly and his orchestra perform at the Royal Festival Hall, giving the first concert of the South Bank's new "Classic International" series, which features some of the world's best-known orchestras. The Concertgebouw, alone out of the orchestras involved, will give two further concerts in the series, one in February 2000, the other in June. The series's original six orchestras are now down to five, since Riccardo Muti and the Orchestra of La Scala Milan have pulled out, amid frantic press allegations that Muti might dislike performing in London because of its acerbic music critics.

Chailly, however, resolutely declares: "I very much enjoy performing in London." He appreciates the nature of the audience. "We had an extremely warm public reception at the Festival Hall last spring. Now we have really a feeling of expectation from the audience; we feel that we are increasingly building up a relationship. When I conduct the LSO at the Barbican, I am very impressed by the quality and the quantity of the listeners, because I always do programmes which are not the most popular. Next year I will do Varèse and Mahler: great pieces, but not the most appealing to a large public. I played this type of programme twice in the last four years and it proved that the London public likes to be challenged. I regard it as one of the best publics in Europe. But you have to give them a real performance - you cannot take it for granted."

The programme for Wednesday's concert consists of the same programme that opened the Concertgebouw's season at home: Webern's deeply romantic musical poem *Im Sommerwind*, Berg's *Seven Early Songs* and Mahler's *Fourth Symphony*, the latter two works with the American soprano Barbara Bonney as soloist.

Mahler's *Fourth* is often described as the composer's sunniest and most relaxed symphony; Chailly's interpretation of the work, however, is somewhat darker. In the Amsterdam concert, I suggest to him, a bleaker, more pessimistic spirit seemed to emerge. Chailly, enthusiastically declaring that this was exactly what he wanted to convey, seizes his score from his desk to point out the premonition of the *Fifth Symphony's* opening trumpet call, "like a black shadow onto the first movement"; the macabre quality of the scherzo, "a dance of death"; and the three despairing climaxes in which the adagio implodes before the soprano solo restores serenity in the finale.

The link between Webern and Berg to Mahler is vital, he adds. "Looking back you can see clearly that Mahler is at the heart of their developments; without Mahler first, the Second Viennese School would not have become what it was."

It may seem more unusual for Chailly to link Mahler to another great Concertgebouw tradition: Bach. "The Concertgebouw Orchestra has had for 100 years the tradition of being one of the greatest Bach orchestras performing the *St Matthew Passion*: Willem Mengelberg [chief conductor, 1895-1945] performed this piece every year for nearly half a century," Chailly explains.

"And Mahler's link with Bach is something that should be regarded generally with far more importance. Towards the end of his life, Mahler was studying Bach's works intensively and he made a suite which is a new orchestration of movements from the second and third suites of Bach. He performed it many times in New York; he had also planned to conduct the *St Matthew Passion* but died before he could achieve this. This is why we plan to perform Bach in connection with Mahler, including this suite. At the time Mahler created it, 1909 or 1910, Bach was almost untouched by modern orchestras - and if you look at how many times he performed the suite you can see how completely he believed in the greatness of Bach's music."

Recently, Bach has largely been annexed by period-instrument ensembles, and modern symphony orchestras frequently shy away from this repertoire. Not so the Concertgebouw: "It would be ridiculous and absolutely obsolete already to try to imitate the old instruments. But there is an informed culture in this orchestra on modern instruments, which I respect very much - I find that tradition very stylish and convincing. I will perform the *St Matthew Passion* in London with the LSO for their 100th anniversary season in 2004 and my approach will be exactly the same: playing in a certain style with a knowledge of baroque music, but without pretending to imitate baroque orchestras, because this is a completely different sound."

Chailly's background involves, like his job, an element of creative tension between the traditional and the new. He is the son of the composer Luciano Chailly, who became artistic director of La Scala, Milan, in 1968. The young Riccardo grew up steeped in La Scala's famous tradition of Italian opera, and one of his first jobs, at the tender age of 21, was as Claudio Abbado's assistant conductor there.

Ultimately, however, he rebelled, in the direction of modernism and the great European symphonists. "I needed always to know more, and when I went to the Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra as principal conductor [1982-89], this was an important chance for me to develop in

the European tradition with excellent artists." Today, although the works of Mahler, the Second Viennese School, Varèse, and such composers as Zemlinsky and Janacek are central to his repertory, he has made his peace with Italian opera - this year he will record Leoncavallo's Pagliacci.

The realities of orchestral life can sometimes be less peaceful. Even with its lengthy history and worldwide fame, the Concertgebouw Orchestra, like many orchestras, has to struggle to stay afloat financially. "There is a rule in Holland which decrees that all artistic institutions should be given the same amount from the government," explains Chailly. "But I think it's the wrong principle. Art cannot be equalised in this way. It needs outstanding individual talents, and the Concertgebouw Orchestra represents that, in terms of what it means to the culture of Holland. I always say that the orchestra needs what La Scala has in Italy: a special financial treatment from the national government. We have been complaining for years - we lost our voice shouting - but it still has not happened. Fortunately we have some important sponsors, which has solved our problem for the moment, but that does not mean we should relax. I think that this orchestra has proven through more than a century what it represents for the national culture."

So, amid the financial battling, the vagaries of musical fashion and personnel changes over the years, has the Concertgebouw retained its unique sound? Chailly points out that it is now increasingly important for orchestras to create different styles of sound for different composers. But that special sound, he insists, is still there. "Take the opening pages of Mahler's Fourth. The opening rallentando upbeat of the first violins that lands so lightly into the melody: that lightness, like silk, is so typical of the Concertgebouw Orchestra sound that it's unavoidable that you recognise it. This orchestra's sound can speak by itself after two bars."

- Riccardo Chailly conducts the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra next Wednesday, 7.30pm Royal Festival Hall (0171 960 4242).