

# INSPIRATIONS IN 1000 WORDS

## Meet the Artist – Matthew Sharp, cellist

FEBRUARY, 2018

### *Who or what inspired you to take up the 'cello and pursue a career in music?*

Juicy low notes, an absent cello-playing father, Tchaikovsky's Romeo & Juliet/Star Wars (for my 6-year old purveyor, a concert without these items on the programme just didn't cut it), Verdi's Falstaff (aged 6, I played the Page Boy in a stellar cast of AMAZING British singers conducted by Roger Norrington and directed by Jonathan Miller – the horn call that heralded Nanetta and Fenton's night-time tryst and the magic of the 'nymphs, elves' music completely spell-bound me – music IS magic, after all).

### *Who or what have been the most important influences on your musical life and career?*

Robert Le Page – two of his one-man shows 'back in the day': The Far Side of the Moon and The Andersen Project. Intimate, epic, harnessing cutting edge technology but all about the human touch. I thought, 'I'm going to do this for classical music, in my own way.'

Kneehigh Theatre – especially 'The Bacchae' and 'Tristan and Iseult'. I went to see 'The Bacchae' with a legendary hangover and found its descent into a murderous rave world completely intoxicating – classic text meets visceral imagination (meets my legendary hangover) = THAT'S how to communicate something 'from the canon'. And then I was lucky enough to work with them briefly, during which time Emma Rice sorted me out a couple of tickets for their sold out run of 'Tristan and Iseult' at the Cottesloe [at the National Theatre, London]. I went with the woman who became my wife. I couldn't talk about the show for weeks afterwards without weeping.

Shakespeare – I really like nights out with fabulous art that somehow tend towards the condition of a Shakespeare play – where Hamlet needs his Gravediggers, Macbeth his Drunken Porter and King Lear his Fool. I'm being simplistic/dualistic (child of the binary/digital age)...but I hope you know what I mean. Clearly, the earthy and ethereal, bawdy and transcendent, unhinged and rational, 'tragical-comical-historical-pastoral' exist 'cheek by jowl' in works from the classical music canon...I find they rarely get a chance to breathe like that, though. Something to do, I think, with an overweening concern for propriety in the performance of classical music. Obviously, the really great music itself

from the canon isn't concerned with propriety (even if it is concerned with poise/balance/proportion etc) – it's too busy being about important things like people, the world, meaning, expression.

So, Shakespeare is a kind of touchstone and guru/shaman in my own adventures.

My extraordinary teachers (Kate Beare, Alexander Baillie, Boris Pergamenschikow, Ulla Blom, Sam Kenyon).

Those cello-playing 'animals', where the cello-playing disappears – Shafran, Rostropovich, Harrell.

George London (Canadian bass-baritone), Dmitri Hvorostovsky (Russian baritone – my cello teacher, Boris Pergamenschikow, would give me tapes of Hvorostovsky singing Russian romances...I wore it out).

***What have been the greatest challenges of your career so far?***

Negotiating the feudal system inherent in the classical music industry in the UK – I'm still not especially adept at it! I have an aesthetic that's deeply rooted in connection, communication, the transformative potential of music being performed RIGHT NOW. That can make me seem like a Wild Man sometimes! When that meets an aesthetic that's rooted in the academic, amateur, choral tradition, impartial and dispassionate (profile the BBC and its various 'voices', for instance) – excellent qualities though they are! – it can take some neuro-linguistic adjustment to chime. For me, music is mainly about the visceral and the spiritual. The intellect is a useful tool along the way but, personally, in performance, I'm not that interested in beholding the intellect on stage. There are more vital things at stake and bigger risks to take.

***Which performance/recordings are you most proud of?***

Ooooofff. Today...John Tavener's *The Fool* at the QEH. It's a mighty kind of dramatic cantata that he wrote for me to sing and play.

Recordings-wise, the one that's out on February 16 (and then the solo disc coming out in April...obvs!). The Feb 16 recording is the world premiere recording of Hans Gál's glorious *Cello Concertino*, along with his epic solo sonata and solo suite. Simon Fox-Gál produced it and he has captured the cello sound AMAZINGLY!

(And I also have to mention my recording of Errollyn Wallen's fabulous/fiendish cello concerto – she's a wonderful composer, extraordinary person and dear friend, and her cello concerto has deeply touched SO MANY listeners).

***Which particular works do you think you play best?***

For better or for worse, I think my nature and talents – such as they are – are good at connecting with and communicating works with big hearts, innate drama and an invitation to some kind of extremity in them. I like to go the ledge beyond the edge and report back. Don Quixote, Penderecki 2nd Cello Concerto, Rachmaninov Sonata – that's today's Top Three.

***How do you make your repertoire choices from season to season?***

Generally by saying 'yes' and going to where the excitement is.

***Do you have a favourite concert venue to perform in and why?***

Victoria Hall in Geneva is exquisite, grand yet intimate. But actually, I find I'm less and less fussy – about acoustics, stage orientation etc. My job is to lay it on the line and 'only connect' and as long as I can see/hear, be seen/heard, then I'm really happy to get on with that.

***Who are your favourite musicians?***

So many of my inspiring colleagues. I'm lucky to work with some of the greatest musicians I know – brimming with generosity, creativity, virtuosity. They make me better.

***What is your most memorable concert experience?***

When I was 19, I gave the first 'from memory' performance of Tavener's 'The Protecting Veil' in Trinity College Chapel, Cambridge. The intensity of the silence that followed that sublime piece was unforgettable.

***As a musician, what is your definition of success?***

Keeping going – adventurously, hungrily, positively – like the Great White Shark on the first page of Peter Benchley's JAWS...carving out time and space to manifest my creative dreams...paying the bills.

*What do you consider to be the most important ideas and concepts to impart to aspiring musicians?*

Well, I did some 'improvisation' workshops and a performance with my band ZRI at the Yehudi Menuhin School last week. It was UNFORGETTABLE. The essence of what we offered was: accept and build, grow your own artist, honour your curiosity by continuing to take creative risks. The reaction we received was mind-blowing. These particular students were craving these kinds of ideas, concepts, approaches and tools. I think it's time to bring our music education up to date. It's possible to balance vision and provenance and train young musicians for a career right now.

*Many thanks to Matthew for sharing these thoughts!*

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*Matthew Sharp is internationally recognised as both a compelling classical artist and a fearless pioneer. His adventures in and through music and across disciplines are 'unrivalled' and 'unprecedented', balancing provenance and vision in a unique and potent way.*

*He studied cello with Boris Pergamenschikow in Cologne, voice with Ulla Blom in Stockholm and English at Trinity College, Cambridge. He was taken to Jacqueline du Pré when he was 12, Galina Vishnewskaya when he was 18 and studied chamber music with the Amadeus Quartet. He performs at major venues and festivals worldwide as solo cellist, baritone, actor and director.*

*Matthew has appeared as solo performer with the RPO, LPO, RLPO, CBSO, Orchestra of Opera North, SCO, EUCCO, ESO, NCO, Manchester Camerata, Orchestra of the Swan, Orchestra X, Arensky Chamber Orchestra, and Ural Philharmonic.*

*In opera, he has performed principal roles for Opera North, ROH, Almeida Opera and Mahogany Opera Group, amongst many others.*

*In theatre, he has performed principal roles at the Young Vic and National Theatre Studio, collaborated with Kneehigh, Complicité and, most recently, with legendary illustrator and film-maker, Dave McKean.*

*He has recorded for Sony, EMI, Decca, Naxos, Somm, NMC, Avie and Whirlwind and appeared in recital as both cellist and singer at Wigmore Hall, SBC and Salle Gaveau.*

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