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Sir Roger Norrington is one of a relatively small group of
distinguished English conductors who have made successful careers
in Germany. For too long it seemed that the English Channel acted as some kind of barrier against British musicians working in continental Europe. It is sometimes said that the final and most significant breakthrough to this implicit embargo only came with Sir Simon Rattle’s appointment as Principal Conductor of Herbert von Karajan’s former orchestra, the Berlin Philharmonic. The date was 1999, two years after Roger Norrington accepted his knighthood for services to music.

There is no doubt that from a public-relations viewpoint a noble honor, such as a knighthood, helps British conductors to expand their overseas careers. For Sir Roger Norrington, the offer to become Principal Conductor of the Stuttgart Radio Symphony Orchestra [Link: <http://www.swr.de/orchister-und-ensembles/rso/-/id=788472/llv7mu/index.html.>] came just a year after the acceptance of his title.

The appointment was a challenge for all involved. Like most German radio orchestras, the Stuttgart players were traditionally most at ease with modern repertoire, which was their staple fare. So there can be
little doubt that Roger Norrington’s historically-informed music-making came as something of a surprise to many of them. Happily, by 2009, when this DVD was made, they had developed into a formidable team, giving individual and spirited performances of many works by Mozart and his contemporaries alongside more modern scores. Seeing them at work on this disc makes it easy to understand why the players are so at home with Haydn’s music. Time and again one is reminded of the composer’s own experience as director of the Esterházy band, where mutual respect and enjoyment of the music-making seem to have been central factors to their success. In these performances, the many smiles and nods from the conductor are just one indication of their happy teamwork together.

The DVD consists of performances of three Haydn symphonies and a documentary film by Karl Thumm. The works presented are Symphonies Nos. 96 (Miracle), 101 (Clock) and 1. From the accompanying booklet, it seems that the music was recorded at two live performances in November 2008, in the orchestra’s regular venue and before invited audiences. Released a year later, it marked
the 200th anniversary of Haydn’s death in 1809, and Roger Norrington’s 75th birthday.

The visual presentation of these three symphonies is in the capable hands of director Nele Munchmeyer, whose documentary work for Haydn and similar cultural subjects is highly regarded in Germany and beyond. Technically speaking it would appear that there were some limitations imposed by the context of these performances, that is of two public concerts given by the orchestra in a modern studio. As a result, some shots are less well lit than others, and inevitably the use of seven static cameras means that some flexibility in the visual content is lost. But these are small matters. The overall production is visually very satisfying.
The music

Turning to the DVD’s musical content, it is good to have two late Haydn symphonies contrasted with one of his earliest. In the performance of Symphony No. 1 Roger Norrington’s historically informed approach is clearly evident. The work was probably written around 1758 for Count Morzin, for whom Haydn worked before joining the Esterházy family. Here, his court orchestra is represented by a group of 14 players: three 1st violins, three 2nd violins, a viola, cello, bassoon and double bass, to which are added two oboes and two horns. In line with what we know of 18th-century performance
practice, the four lower instrumentalists are seated center stage, with the upper strings and oboes ranged in a semi-circle around them — the first violins on the left and the seconds on the right. It is particularly good to see a bassoonist in the group, since Haydn’s own preference was to include one whenever possible. Too often omitted in modern performances, the composer’s letter of 1768 to the Cistercian monastery at Zwetterl concerning the forthcoming performance of his Applausus cantata makes the composer’s position quite clear: "in the soprano aria the bassoon can be omitted if absolutely necessary, but I would rather have it present, at least when the bass is obbligato throughout. And I prefer a band with three bass instruments – ‘cello, bassoon and double bass." Rather surprisingly, there is no harpsichord, which seems a somewhat inconsistent decision on the Norrington’s part, given that he includes it in the two later symphonies.

Symphony No. 1 in D is elegantly directed by the leader, who follows one of the conductor’s trademark principles by using no vibrato. The performers play at modern pitch on modern instruments and observe all repeats in each of the three movements. One imaginative detail is
Roger Norrington’s presence onstage for this performance. He is clearly visible, sitting behind the first violins, from where he can be seen on camera offering discreet encouragement with the occasional nod or smile.

For the two London symphonies the orchestra is expanded and carefully set out on the platform in an unusual arrangement. As in many of Norrington’s concerts, it is evidence of the conductor’s well-known attitude to musical performance, which is to take nothing for granted. Here the harpsichord player faces the audience in the middle of the stage, with two symmetrical groups of eight violins, two violas, two celli and two double basses on his left and right. The winds, brass, and timpani are placed on risers behind.

Having pioneered much of the research in to historically-informed performance, it is interesting to note that in these performances Norrington is happy to compromise about what instruments should be used. While the flute, trumpets and timpani appear to be 18th-century copies, the oboes, clarinets and horns are modern, as are the bows of the string players.
On this disc, the performances of both London symphonies are assured and convincing. Norrington’s tempi in Symphony No. 96 are well-chosen, and characteristically he brings out the virtues of Haydn’s writing for the wind instruments in the slow movement with affectionate care. More provocative is the fast speed of the famous "clock" movement in Symphony No. 101. As the conductor argues in the documentary that follows, if Haydn was indeed inspired by the ticking of a clock, and wished to imitate it, the pulse would have to be either 60 or 120 beats per second. Not surprisingly, Roger Norrington chooses the faster tempo, with interesting results.

The documentary film

A conductor between Stuttgart and Berkshire is the title of Karl Thumm’s film included on this DVD. It follows Roger Norrington’s journeys to and from his home in the UK and the Stuttgart studios of the SWR Radio Symphony Orchestra. It also charts their ten-year quest to find the "Stuttgart sound" of which they are all rightly proud. The film cuts expertly between scenes of the orchestra in rehearsal and performance, and conversations to camera with Felix Fisher, the
orchestra’s general manager, and Norrington himself. Both men speak well. Fisher describes his colleague as "a typical Englishman" and stresses his humor and vivacity as well as his deep love of music and democratic way of working. Norrington explains how, as chief conductor, he hoped to find a "Stuttgart sound" by bringing his previous experience with chamber orchestras, such as his London Classical Players, to bear on his work with this symphony orchestra.

The director elegantly links the various strands of this film together by following the orchestra’s third visit to the BBC Proms in July 2008. Their two-day visit began with a provocative first vibrato-less performance of Elgar’s Symphony No. 1, which proved revelatory for both audience and orchestra. The next day was spent at Sir Roger Norrington’s spacious country house where he and his family entertained the players with a traditional garden party. The footage of the musicians being welcomed by their noble host wearing blue shorts and a Panama hat plays well with the conductor’s pleasure at being known as something of an English eccentric. But, as with his great aristocratic predecessor Sir Thomas Beecham, it would be a mistake to be more than momentarily distracted by this image. Far
more important is Roger Norrington's vivid imagination and talent for making music – something which this DVD makes abundantly clear.

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