

REVIEW OF 87



MUSIC Rattle's Rhythm

1987 has been the year of Simon Rattle. Brian Horton on the young British conductor who is winning world-wide acclaim. Stuart Cosgrove on the rise of Def Jam, and John Street on the fall of Red Wedge.

The great orchestral conductors, Toscanini, Furtwangler, Beecham, Boult, were stars of great magnitude, with the kind of unapproachable charisma more usually associated with statesmen. There are few left in that mould, perhaps only Andre Previn, Leonard Bernstein, and Simon Rattle. With Rattle, though, the essence of his very considerable charisma is his very approachability and youth. The last year has seen him suddenly break through to a genuine mass audience. Intriguingly - and unlike Previn - this hasn't been achieved via tv. Remarkably, his international reputation stems very largely from his unusual concert programming with a 'provincial' orchestra in Birmingham, and in less than ideal

concert halls. Still only modestly into his 30s, he's already the most recognisable face in classical music-making and already the subject of a biography; that sort of accolade usually only comes with retirement.

Rattle could now name his city and his price, but he has remained faithful to the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra (CBSO) to which he was appointed principal conductor in 1979 at the age of 24. This was one of the most significant musical appointments of the last decade, a sure sign of a shift in the centre of cultural gravity away from London and toward the 'provinces'. Since 1979 Rattle has more or less avoided the have-baton-will-travel syndrome in favour of a steady application to per-

formance and educational work in his adopted city.

Cynics have suggested that Rattle's loyalty to Birmingham was no more than a marriage into money, for the year began with renewed talk of plans to so stiffen his orchestra financially as to make it the 'superorchestra' that would compete on better than even terms with the London forces. Orchestral politics are notoriously byzantine and involve much suspicion and infighting. Refreshingly, Rattle is known as a clean fighter.

If 1987 has been a relatively quiet year for Simon Rattle in purely musical terms, that is simply because more of his time has been taken up with behind the scenes work on the orchestra's development plan which should culminate in 1991 with a move to the Birmingham Convention Centre, a concert space that makes the much-vaunted Barbican look and sound like a scout hut.

It's important, though, not to lose sight of the fact that Simon Rattle is a musician

and not a politician. In the year that he received an honorary degree from Birmingham Polytechnic, he has worked steadily, educationally, at bringing new music as well as established repertoires to what is now regarded as one of the most committed and musically literate audiences in Europe. It is this combination that makes Rattle unique.

A CBSO concert at Leeds in May mixed Beethoven and Ravel with Gershwin and Toru Takemitsu's *A Flock Descends on the Pentagonal Garden*. That, if you like, is the quintessential Rattle programme: the Gershwin he grew up with, the sheer sensuous pleasure of Ravel, the strikingly innovative and the quietly respectful but completely-achieved reading of a classic. More than anything else, it is his *personal* involvement in the programme that sets him apart from other, less-rooted conductors.

He is also profoundly modest, not always a concomitant of genius. At 24, he'd vowed

not to touch a work like the Choral Symphony until he was very much older. Most conducting, though, is a matter of opportunity rather than principle and this year's Aldeburgh Festival saw him pair the Beethoven with Benjamin Britten's *Sinfonia da Requiem* in what must count as the concert of the year, every bit as profound as his first contact with 'the Ninth' in Birmingham, an occasion on which the critics ran out of superlatives.

With the advent of digital recording and the compact disc, conductors no longer fear the recording studio and Rattle's influence is every bit as significant in that direction. 1987 saw the appearance of major recordings of Elgar, Mahler and Messiaen; again, that typical mixture - English, classic and modernist. Elgar's *The Dream of Gerontius* is a Midlands favourite and thus a risky proposition; the result, predictably, was triumphant. The risks in handling Messiaen's complex *Turangalila-Symphony* are rather different. Its potential popularity has long been thwarted by poor, lackadaisical readings; its 'difficulty' is usually pure mess. Mahler's second symphony, mishandled, can be pure mush. Rattle brings both to exuberant life.

Less demanding is the recent album of jazz-inspired classics by the likes of Milhaud, Gershwin, Stravinsky and Bernstein. This, one suspects, is his first and best love, somewhere he can indulge a former tympanist's passion for rhythm. It's that, rather than perfect pitch or charisma that makes a great conductor.

Without rancour, it's encouraging to find some cracks in the almost perfect edifice. During 1987 Rattle completed his Sibelius cycle with symphonies 4, 5 and 6, all yet to be released. Their predecessors were a disappointment. Sibelius gave Rattle none of the rhythmic purchase he likes and the outcome was a curiously stiff performance. Who would want to predict, though, that he hasn't put that right between 1985 and now?©

Nasty With Style

'The rap's final, on black vinyl/Soul. Rock 'n' Roll. Coming like a rhino / Tables turn suckers burn. / They can't disable the power of my label/DEF JAM tells you who I am / The enemy is public: never give a damn.' (Public Enemy *Rebel Without A Pause* ('87).

When they rewind the ghet-toblaster of 1987, a New York record company called Def Jam will make the loudest noise. It began the year quietly, stirring the imagination of the pop press and exciting the underground club scene. By the time the year had ended, Def Jam had become a phenomenon, the patch on every black jacket and the heart and soul of yet another moral panic.

Nobody can forget the highlights. The management of Hammersmith Odeon trebled their security to contain a tour headlined by New York rappers **Ru DMC**. The shows passed without major incident but a mixture of hyperbole, street tension, noise and high anxiety created a popular equation linking rap music with violence.

The unsocial image was exploited by Def Jam wunderpunks, **The Beastie Boys**, whose critically acclaimed debut album, *Licensed To Ill*, became the focus for a weird pantomime involving wrecked hotel rooms, leukemia victims, a famous showdown with Liverpool casuals and the recent courtcase in which Beastie Boy Ad Rock was cleared of injuring a teenage girl with a flying beer can. Britain hated The Beasties. Strange. They were everything we are taught to respect; they were rich, arrogant and middle class, and they were earning a fortune on a minimal amount of talent. Maybe we were taught to hate them because they had such a perverse similarity to the year's other moral panic, the yuppie.

As The Beasties retreated back to America, Def Jam



Public Enemy: A gang of militant homeboys



Beastie Boys: Became the focus for weird rituals

fired another intermediate missile, a new rap tour featuring **LL Cool J**, the first sex symbol of hip-hop and a gang of militant homeboys called **Public Enemy**. In the true spirit of cultural dichotomy, they represented extreme ends of contemporary black music. **Cool J** was the sexual athlete. He'd been arrested in Georgia a few months before his arrival in London, for simulating the sex act on stage. And **Public Enemy** were the exhumed body of black power, a chapter of new wave rappers reared on Malcolm X.

The stories of stolen VW signs had barely disappeared when the tabloid press discovered 'steaming', the new buzz word for concentrated mugging. This time it was the police who trebled the security, warning tube travellers to avoid the Metropolitan

Line on the night of the **Def Jam** concert, in case they became the victims of organised theft. The usual headlines were paraded. The same old platitudes were wheeled out, some from sociologists others from the police, but as usual the voice of the hip-hop scene was absent. No one quite got round to asking them how they felt about steaming. The main victims of attacks at London's hip-hop concerts were black teenagers, but somehow that didn't quite count.

Def Jam provided the most vital soundtrack to 1987, throwing up noise and stylised nastiness in what turned out to be the best scam since punk. It had everything: court cases, violence, headlines, rebels and rhymes in effect. For one brief flash of the technics pop was 'public enemy number one'. •

End Of Wedge

Red Wedge was the other alliance which tried to break the mould in 1987. Instead of David Owen there was Billy Bragg; and instead of the SDP and the Liberals, there were rock musicians, alternative comedians and the Labour Party.

Red Wedge made a practical link between popular culture and politics, building on and broadening the precedents set by Rock Against Racism. The events it organised were often fun, occasionally moving and usually popular.

But for all the promise and the publicity given to Red Wedge in the year before the election, its star has seemed to fade since, tarnished by Labour's dire performance and by changes in pop fashion. The Left's live aid might be taken for dead. Certainly, Labour's leadership may be thinking of burying it.

For Kinnock, Red Wedge seemed to promise a return of the young who had deserted the party in 1983, when only 29% of first-time voters supported Labour and 41% the Tories. With Jm young voters on the electoral register, Red Wedge was to reverse the trend by enhancing Labour's image among the young. Sure enough, in 1987, Labour's youth support rose to 34%, but this still left them 11% behind Thatcher's brood. And although Tory support among 23-44 year olds fell by 7%, the results hardly rewarded Kinnock for his role in the Tracey Ullman video or his appearance on *Saturday Swap Shop*.

Red Wedge's own ambitions were less tied to Labour's electoral performance. It wanted to make young people 'realise that politics is a part of everyday life'.

Getting them to vote was only the start. Their goals also meant changing the party, rather than being used by it. They wanted to see the party focus on the plight of the young and to take seriously the place of the culture industries (and the example of the GLC).

It is a strategy which has not yet succeeded. The promise of a

ministry for the arts and media was given two short paragraphs towards the end of the election manifesto. The young received more attention, but they were buried within Labour's general economic strategy. The leadership's commitment to the culture industries was further undermined by the replacement of Norman Buchan, as shadow minister, by Nark Fisher. Buchan was closely allied with the view that there should be a central ministry co-ordinating all broadcasting and cultural policy.

But while Red Wedge may not

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have delivered the voters or changed the party, it cannot be written off. As the Labour leadership has gone off in search of the illusive yuppie, Red Wedge has shifted its attention to local politics, trying to build a network of cultural projects and working to set up venues and concerts.

There has been a move too towards cultural pluralism and a weakening of the categories which constrict dominant conceptions of popular music. Billy Bragg, for example, has joined forces with the Nicaraguan musician Luis Enrique Godoy on a Red Wedge sponsored tour. Bragg has also said he wants to recruit some heavy metal bands to Red Wedge's roster.

It is, however, one thing to add to the list of bands who join Red Wedge, it is quite another to integrate politics and popular culture for socialism's sake. Pop performers can't be used to create political coalitions, because fans don't neatly convert into party supporters. Red Wedge has to move from electoral politics to cultural politics. It has to move from *giving* pleasure to punters to enabling them to *take and make* their

And to make life harder, Red Wedge has to put the socialism into pleasure while the Labour Party tries to take it out of politics. •