

John Axelrod: The ex-rock talent scout who's trying to save classical music

People must be persuaded back into the concert hall, or orchestras will cease to exist, says the acclaimed conductor

By Jessica Duchen, November 22, 2012

John Axelrod studied with Leonard Bernstein, who taught him to embrace a range of musical activities. Photo: Stefano Bottesi

John Axelrod would be the first to admit that outspokenness and popularity do not often go together. But that is not going to stop the conductor in his determination to shake up the classical music status quo.

Born in Houston, Axelrod seems to have been on a turbulent path from the start. After studying with Leonard Bernstein, and then at Harvard and in Los Angeles, he tested his wings in eclectic directions: he managed a wine company and worked for a while as a rock 'n' roll talent scout. He even helped to launch the career of singer-songwriter Tori Amos.

It was 1995 before he returned to his first love, classical music, and resumed conducting studies, first in St Petersburg and later in the United States. He is now music director of the Orchestre National des Pays de la Loire in France.

And with a mandate to put the orchestra firmly on the international map, he has taken the ensemble into the recording studio: their latest release is *American Serenade*, featuring music by Bernstein, Gershwin and Waxman, with the acclaimed Swiss violinist Rachel Kolly d'Alba.

Axelrod seems to have absorbed from Bernstein a predilection for thinking big, a determination to embrace a range of musical activities and, perhaps most of all, a passion for the correlation between Judaism and music and the expression of the one via the other.

"My activities are seen by some as uncategorisable because I'm so diverse in my interests," he says. "But there's one thing that draws everything together, whether I'm a conductor, a composer, a writer, an impresario, a producer or an educator. I learned a lot from Bernstein about being all things to all people, and what links all these activities is this: art for public access."

"All my projects share the same goal: developing audiences for the instrument that plays classical music, ie the orchestra. To persuade people actually to go to the concert hall, to where the orchestra is performing — because if we don't have an audience, we don't exist."

Axelrod has brought out a book about precisely this dilemma. Currently it is only available in German; an English edition has, he says, been contracted, though not yet issued.

The title translates as How Great Music is Made, Or Not, and in it he tackles head-on the issues that, in his view, are stopping the art-form from moving effectively with the times: among them, the exorbitant salaries of US orchestral musicians, conductors and managers, the problem of “absentee” maestros and finding ways to encourage musical organisations to make themselves indispensable to their local communities.

Axelrod's Jewish background remains central to his philosophy, especially in recognising the significance of handing down classical music's great traditions.

“When you look at the history of music, you also see the history of Judaism,” he suggests. “For instance, Felix Mendelssohn's grandfather was Moses Mendelssohn, founder of Reform Judaism. There's a quote that I love from Abraham Mendelssohn, son of Moses, father of Felix and a famous banker in his own right. He said: 'For most of my life I was known as the son of my father and for the rest of my life I'm going to be known as the father of my son'.

'In 2004 I did a concert in the Konzerthaus of Berlin. It was a film music programme, Annette was moderator and our daughter was one-year-old. When we got to the music from Schindler's List, Annette said to the audience: I'm a German Catholic. My man is an American Jew. Our daughter is the answer to the Holocaust. There was not a dry eye in the house'

"To me, that's what Judaism represents. It means that we are the inheritors of this great tradition of Judaism. Part of that comes in dialogue with God; it also comes in dialogue with music.

“I like this philosophy because it's about looking to the past and being faithful to that tradition, but it's also about being the ‘fathers of our sons’, supporting, encouraging, inspiring and even challenging when necessary. It's in our Jewish tradition to challenge, to question things, to carry on that tradition and bring it into modernity.”

In 2007 the BBC produced an award-winning documentary entitled *Holocaust: A Musical Memorial* which included a performance by Axelrod and the Sinfonietta Cracovia in the grounds of Auschwitz — a seismic moment for him.

“This musical experience is allowing us to put the Holocaust into context for the next generation so that they never forget,” he says.

The work closest to his heart is Bernstein's Symphony No 3, *Kaddish* — a work that he has had a hand in updating, together with Samuel Pisar, the renowned lawyer, author, member of John F Kennedy's government, survivor of Auschwitz and founder of Yad Vashem France.

Axelrod premiered the work with a new text by Pisar — a measure originally suggested, many years earlier, by Bernstein himself. Since then he has performed it widely, including at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, where Pisar recited his own poem, *Dialogue with God*.

“When I conduct the *Kaddish* Symphony and I hear Sam's text, arguing with God, then there comes the realisation that we are all together in our common home, no matter whether we're Jewish, Christian, Muslim or any other religion,” says Axelrod.

“I feel more Jewish when I make this music. I feel I am part of that linear evolution, part of this tradition that comes from the teachings of my fathers and mothers and allows me, through my music, to pass that on to my sons and daughters.”

He is speaking only partly metaphorically: he has a nine-year-old daughter from a previous relationship with the German arts TV presenter Annette Gerlach.

“In 2004 I did a concert in the Konzerthaus of Berlin,” he recounts. “It was a film music programme, Annette was moderator for the evening and our daughter was one-year-old. When we got to the music from Schindler's List, Annette said to the audience: 'I'm a German Catholic. My man is an American Jew. Our daughter is the answer to the Holocaust'. There was not a dry eye in the house.”

‘American Serenade’ is out now on Warner Classics