

Interview: Ivan Fischer

The far-right is increasingly popular in Hungary. The country's premier conductor believes that music can help stem the tide

By Jessica Duchon, January 18, 2011

If you go to the Royal Festival Hall this Sunday, listen out for a lot of Hungarian around the foyers. Speakers of this fearsomely complex language will be out in force: January 16 marks the London launch of both the Hungarian presidency of the European Union and the bicentenary year of that Hungarian-born musical legend, Franz Liszt.



Ivan Fischer conducts, and also composes "simple works with Yiddish texts"

The Budapest Festival Orchestra will mark the event in a special concert of music by Haydn, Beethoven and Liszt himself (part of the Southbank Centre's Shell Classic International series). Wielding the baton will be its founding director, the Hungarian-Jewish conductor Ivan Fischer.

Fischer is an undersung genius of the podium: he is among the most inspiring conductors in the world, yet has not entirely gained the universal recognition his musicianship deserves. Despite having held distinguished posts with orchestras in the United States and western Europe, he has always chosen to return to his native Budapest, a city off the beaten musical track compared to Vienna and Berlin.

The combined Liszt bicentenary and Hungarian EU presidency represents an exceptional opportunity for the country to boost its profile. "It will not change anything in Hungary," Fischer

says, "but it may change the perception in other countries. Hungary has a rich culture and a very troubled present situation."

Following the financial meltdown of 2008, Hungary, its currency plummeting and unemployment rising, was close to bankruptcy. Last year, the far-right, openly racist Jobbik Party won 47 seats in parliament. The country's presidency of the EU has already proved controversial: one of the country's best-known musicians, Andras Schiff, published a letter in the Washington Post questioning its government's suitability for the task.

"The situation is uncomfortable," Fischer acknowledges, "but our concerts with the Budapest Festival Orchestra are important to many people there, including the 100,000 Jews in Budapest. There is growing nationalism and racism in Hungary, with hatred against the gypsy community. One needs to stand up against these tendencies."

Fischer was born into a musical Hungarian-Jewish family in Budapest in 1951; his elder brother, Adam, is also a celebrated conductor, currently music director of the Hungarian Radio Symphony Orchestra. The young Ivan's earliest memories include the 1956 uprising, crushed brutally by Soviet forces.

"I was five years old," he recalls, "and I remember that we had to go to the cellar because of the shelling by tanks." He nevertheless remembers childhood in 1950s and '60s Budapest as "fun", and his musical studies progressed rapidly, encompassing piano, violin, cello and composition.

Later he studied conducting in Vienna with the celebrated German-born musician Nikolaus Harnoncourt, whose influence on him was prodigious. Still, his big break took place in the UK, where he won the Rupert Foundation conducting competition in 1976. This opened doors to guest conducting with the BBC Symphony Orchestra and the London Symphony Orchestra.

His posts have included principal conductorships with prestigious orchestras, most recently with the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington DC, and he has been showered with honours.

His family background is remarkably similar to that of Mahler: both had ancestors who were shopkeepers in the Tatra mountains. One of Fischer's great-grandmothers, though, studied the piano with Franz Liszt himself. "When he wanted to convey the proper rhythm for a Viennese waltz, he danced with her all over the classroom!" Fischer recounts.

The concert on January 16 will include Liszt's Piano Concerto No 1 with the British pianist Stephen Hough as soloist.

"Liszt was an innovator, a pioneer," says Fischer. "Some of his works are underrated because the main value, in his day, was the novelty. They appear less interesting today, 200 years later."

Fischer founded the Budapest Festival Orchestra in 1983 - nurturing it has remained his priority. "My main interest has been to create an orchestra of artists who are emotionally involved and creative," he says. "With some orchestras music-making feels like working.

I think it should feel like playing."

He is planning to cut back on his guest conducting, he adds: "I would like to stop completely in a few years and concentrate on my own orchestra."

Fischer is also a composer, and this is where his fascination with his Jewish roots is most strongly reflected. "I compose sometimes," he says modestly, "usually simple, tonal, vocal works. Many of them have Yiddish texts. This is because

I fear that without compositions this language may be forgotten. Others should also compose in Yiddish."

His most celebrated work is Eine Deutsch-Jiddische Kantate (A German-Yiddish Cantata), which has been performed in several European countries and the US, though has yet to be heard in the UK.

On Sunday the BFO can show exactly what joys their country's music-making can deliver. But in a climate in which culture is under assault by funding cutbacks across Europe, does Fischer feel that music can continue to thrive?

"Music will always survive," he says simply. "It is essential to people. I am not worried."

Royal Festival Hall box office: 0844 875 0073