

This man isn't rattled

A year ago he picked up Simon Rattle's baton as the CBSO's principal conductor. Tonight the nation will scrutinise every move Sakari Oramo makes. Will he crack under the pressure? No chance, says Jessica Duchén

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Taking over the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra from Simon Rattle is a little like taking over Manchester United from Alex Ferguson. Public expectations could scarcely be more formidable. When the news of his imminent departure broke in 1996, Rattle had been the CBSO's musical director for nearly 18 years, famously transforming it from a downtrodden provincial band into a world-class orchestra and Birmingham itself into a thriving centre of cultural activity.

His appointment a few months ago as principal conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, one of the most powerful jobs in the musical world, has confirmed him as the UK's biggest musical success story for many decades. So it came as a surprise to some when the CBSO appointed Sakari Oramo as Rattle's successor, a youthful Finn who had conducted the orchestra only twice.

Oramo has now been in the job for a year; tonight he will be scrutinised nationwide as he makes his debut at the BBC Proms with his orchestra in a live broadcast on BBC2 and BBC Radio 3. Some detractors have inevitably opined that the success of the CBSO had been entirely attributable to Rattle and that without him it would vanish back into oblivion. But Sakari Oramo remains unrattled by such views. "Let them think what they like," he shrugs coolly, "and judge for themselves. But I hope that all judgments will be based on the evidence of the music."

Softly-spoken and unassuming, Oramo exudes a quiet charm that is far from being the commonest characteristic among conductors. There is no flamboyance, no self-importance - instead, a penetrating intelligence, a centred, focused mind and a rare sense of inner strength. He was more surprised than anybody when the telephone rang with the job offer. In fact, he seems surprised to find that he's a conductor at all.

He is a violinist by training, the son of a musicologist father and a pianist mother, and studied conducting more out of curiosity than ambition. He was for seven years a member of the ensemble *Avanti!*, and then became the leader of the Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra. But when the FRSO's conductor fell ill, Oramo had to step in to conduct Brahms's First Symphony at a few minutes'

notice; his success was such that he found himself abruptly appointed co-principal conductor.

Asked when he decided to make the transition to conducting, Oramo says simply that he did not. "That decision was made by others and it took me longer to recognise that there was a transition. Now I can see that it has happened - and I don't know what I think about it!"

His first year with the CBSO "has turned out better than I expected; the difficulties I had imagined have been less than I had feared and there has been a great feeling of support and identification with the orchestra and the Birmingham audience." He says he has experienced no sense of pressure to emulate Rattle. "On the contrary. It seems that the orchestra - and Simon would certainly agree - was ready for a change." His great advantage is that the CBSO's principal conductor is chosen by the players themselves, not imposed by an administration with ulterior motives such as recording contracts (which Oramo doesn't have).

"But the thing I have had to get used to," he says, "is that the funding system of the orchestra is very different from the ones in Scandinavia and Finland. This needs in some ways a different attitude."

In Finland, orchestral subsidy levels are enshrined in law - far indeed from the financial battles to which British orchestras are constantly subjected. The CBSO itself has recently been considering selling its grand piano to reduce its deficit, while Rattle's new orchestra in Berlin receives a subsidy greater than that of the four London orchestras put together. Nevertheless, Oramo insists that working under pressure can be beneficial. "It means that the orchestra has constantly to take care of its audience and be in contact with them. This doesn't happen so much in the Nordic countries."

One might expect this to necessitate "safe" programming of crowd-pulling works, but Birmingham audiences, trained by Rattle's innovations, have grown to expect something well beyond wall-to-wall Tchaikovsky. "They are very receptive to many sorts of music," says Oramo. "You often notice that a programme that would be very safe to attract people in London actually doesn't in Birmingham. They've got used to hearing things that can be categorised as 'different'."

The 1999-2000 season will feature such rarities as Georges Enescu's Third Symphony and Constant Lambert's oratorio *Summer's Last Testament*, alongside programmes themed around Prokofiev's concertos, Sibelius's symphonies, a strong element of British music and a proud move to introduce more contemporary works from Finland. For the future, Oramo suggests that he may organise his programming more tightly around several themes per season. "The orchestra's main job, however, is to play good music well for its audience. It's important not to build too many fancy ideas around it. It's the very basic thing that counts."

In rehearsal too, Oramo tends to focus on crucial basics. "Some orchestras expect you to talk a great deal - especially in Germany! - but I think it is more useful to play and play and play, to communicate in the way that we have to

communicate in the concert." Oramo believes sensible time management is crucial: "Whatever amount of time is at hand, you can always make a good performance by planning and using that time properly."

And in the adrenalin rush of the concert, does he follow precisely what he has rehearsed? "No, never! And I also talk about this to the orchestra: it's a creation every time, it has to follow its inner laws. Of course it's always a risk, but it has to be a risk, otherwise it's not interesting."

Oramo studied with Jorma Panula, the legendary Finnish conductor and professor, some of whose pupils - including Esa-Pekka Salonen and Jukka-Pekka Saraste - are now among the most high-profile of an extraordinary surge of superb musicians who have emerged from Finland in the last decade. Panula's teaching, says Oramo, was inspirational, but down-to-earth. "Twice a week you could conduct a student orchestra for 15 minutes; this would be videoed and analysed afterwards. His advice was always highly practical; he expected everybody to have their own musical ideas, which he did not seek to alter. He always insisted on clarity, and the idea that everything can be found in the score and nothing extra should be glued on. And there is always a certain humility towards the music and the players. The sense of authority has to come by itself - you can't force it."

But today's large number of successful Finnish musicians ultimately owes its origin to firm support at the grass roots educational level - an instructive point, perhaps, for the UK, which has now lost its best home-grown conductor to Berlin. Music, Oramo explains, had been an important factor in the creation of an independent Finnish national identity in the 19th century. "Sibelius, along with writers and many artists, formed essentially the idea of Finland as a separate nation. Previously there was a Finnish people, but the land was always part of something else and under the influence of either Sweden or Russia - and under threat of being integrated culturally into either of them. This sense of awakening is behind the importance that music is given officially today. Any talented child can enter musical classes without having to pay; instruments are provided and good-level teaching is given all the way through. It's not 'elitist' - it's something which belongs to everybody."

Tonight Oramo conducts Bridge's suite *The Sea*, the Sibelius Violin Concerto with Sarah Chang as soloist and finally Nielsen's Fourth Symphony, subtitled *The Inextinguishable*. The Nielsen work was one of the first that Oramo performed with the CBSO, to considerable acclaim, and he has a great regard for it: "The ideas grow from very small musical cells. The symphony is like the image of a human being who has grown out of one cell; troubles come from outside, yet can be solved with inner strength and passion. The word 'inextinguishable' refers to the elementary idea of wanting to go on with life, no matter what happens."

Oramo is taking his orchestra to Finland later this month, where they will perform this same programme at the Helsinki Festival and subsequently in Tallinn, Estonia. As for his Proms debut, today may be Friday the 13th, but luckily Oramo says he is not superstitious. "It's exciting," he smiles.