

# Take life easy

*Andreas Scholl's is perhaps one of the most popular voices around today. His haunting and soulful sound is instantly recognisable and he has a discography that would be the envy of many twice his age for its size and the way he has managed to cross the border from classical audiences to reach a wider public with high-quality, consummately performed repertoire. With the release of his latest album of English folk song, *Wayfaring Stranger*, he has contributed to a genre in a way that is at once accessible, individual and worthy. Here, he talks to **Antonia Couling***

**AC:** *The arrangements of these beautiful songs, by Craig Leon, are very interesting. You could have done anything with them, and in the end the mixture is a successful blend of the classical sound of your voice, the tradition of the songs themselves but then also the quite modern arrangements. Was there any particular approach?*

AS: Saying 'You could have done anything' – that is the most important thing about the folk songs. We have no tools of musicology for those songs. They are not music that was ever intended to be printed in little dots on a white sheet of paper. It's an oral tradition that has been constantly modified wherever it was being sung. So there is not one 'Barbara Allen' but there are, I think, two basic completely different melodies of that song with probably each of them 50 different variations with the story taking a different twist, or where the names of characters are different. And the other version starts 'In Scarlet town where I was born'. Obviously everybody used to sing 'In York town where I was born', 'In London town where I was born' – wherever you were you would sing it differently – so, what is authentic? The tradition of the music means that anything is possible.

**AC:** *On the other hand, I guess, the songs are in everybody's psyche. Everybody knows them so well, more than anything else.*

AS: Yes, so it's not art music, it's really people's music. And the most important thing, to put the singer in the right context, is to be aware that you don't have to be a great singer, a good singer, even an average singer to sing them. In Alfred Deller's recording, reissued as a CD, in the booklet, he says, 'I know all the famous

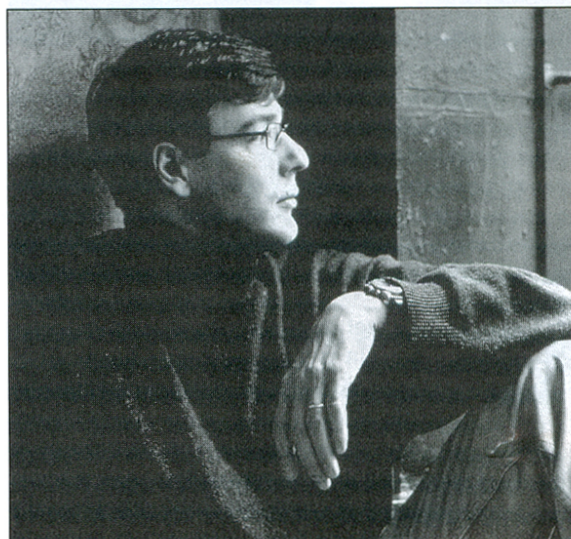
recordings of famous singers, but the deepest memory I have is my nanny singing these for me.'

**AC:** *It's a very interesting statement about songwriting in itself, because the reason that that is true – that anybody can sing them – is that the songs are so melodic and memorable and beautiful in themselves, that they don't need complicated interpretation – perhaps the true mark of successful songwriting. It's also interesting that although we don't know who's written them, it's as if they have always been there.*

AS: It's like the holographic idea of the universe: everything is contained in everything, so those songs are like they are around us in an ether and you just need to have the antenna and you can receive them. They have a magical quality.

I think that the singer ego is the most dangerous thing with folk music. In Germany we had this terrible example of Peter Hoffmann singing Beatles songs. And every Beatles fan thought how terrible, but probably those in classical music thought that it should be that way. It can make people understand each other actually: classical people will listen to pop singers sing classical music and say how terrible, but they should understand that for the pop fans it's the same insult to listen to classical singers singing their pop music.

Both demand a different access, a different key, and I had to find the key to this music, and I think it is about storytelling more than singing. They are beautiful melodies and I think it's a very fine line on which we walk when we sing folk songs. It's easy to just sing them beautifully – for a while that's interesting, but then it gets boring. Alfred Deller was the



JAMES MCMILLAN

master in finding this key. If you listen to his recording, he sings one hour of these songs. Nothing spectacular happens, but you are hypnotised. So the art is not to make it sound like an art. It should be natural. But I think we get away with presenting our singer ego, in all the opera arias and art music, because it's more complicated.

**AC:** *Well, singers can get away with it more if they are singing a whole album of Verdi, for example, because the music is that much bigger and there is so much more going on – it has a different map to it – that it can mask sameness or effortful singing. But here you have to really be careful – it's very naked.*

AS: Or they try to be spectacular for the sake of being spectacular. I haven't been teaching long at all, and I don't want to sound like I have the truth to announce, but I always say every piece, when I open it, poses a question and I have to have a fresh approach. Too many singers open



energy, so we have to try to keep it as easy as possible.

**AC: You are doing Giulio Cesare in Copenhagen in May and it's your second opera, the first being the Rodelinda at Glyndebourne two years ago. Is there any reason why you have not done more opera?**

AS: I was always a bit scared of opera. I knew it needed more than just singing – acting skills. And that was not a method that I was used to expressing myself in. It was obvious that for the first two weeks in Glyndebourne I didn't know what to do at all! And then there was a moment when I got it – one of those moments – and then it was easy, which doesn't mean that from that moment I was a brilliant opera singer, but that from that moment I knew approximately what it should be. At least I could approach the aim.

It was terrible. Louise Winter, whom I already knew, played my sister and for the first two weeks I kept laughing in our scenes. It was terrible – I was so embarrassed. And then she came up to me and said 'Andreas, stop it! Yes, I know it's me, Louise, but now we play that I'm your sister, Ok? It's called opera!' I just couldn't disconnect from myself. That's something that's hard to learn as well in opera. To not be yourself. A friend's acting coach said once, 'Do you think that you as yourself are so interesting that you can sustain interest for a whole opera? Isn't a character like Giulio Cesare probably more interesting?'

But the acting is very hard for the students to learn. I like the idea of treating an aria like a little opera. Or like in that movie, *Shadow of the Vampire*, which starts like a silent movie, where the scene would start and off-camera the director is saying, 'You are lying in your bed. You wake up. You're thinking, Did last night really happen?' And the actor is being told what to do. I like that idea of learning to play a scene. So it's like headlines over phrases in an aria. A thorough approach to the acting shows. But it's so difficult to make this step for the students. It's like protecting yourself. Singing exposes you enough, but acting as well, that makes you even more vulnerable. So they refuse – not consciously, but the body refuses to open up. So they make a gesture but it's not connected. Like simulation of something but not feeling something.

**AC: The thorough approach means that you're looking at a song, an aria, a performance, from 360°, instead of just 180°.**

AS: Also, we have to make a choice as a singer though. Do we want to lose ourselves in our singing? Do I want to

move myself to tears when I sing? Or am I more a messenger that needs to move the audience. Sometimes we are very emotional singing, but it's like selfish singing. I have to give but I have to be open to let something pass through me.

**AC: It's so ethereal. Recently Sting was on Parkinson and was being asked what he thought about when he sang and he said he doesn't think about what he's singing because he wouldn't be able to sing because he would be so upset or moved. Then he went to the stage to sing 'Fields of Gold', which he had written for his wife and he could hardly sing it, because they'd made him think about it, and by the end of the song he was just about holding himself together and he came back and sat down, with tears in his eyes, and said, 'Now look what you've done!'. So it's interesting that when you listen to him you think he seems to be effortlessly conveying and therefore feeling emotion, but he says he's almost not connected. Yet there must be engagement there.**

AS: Exactly. I think Evelyn Tubb explained it as 'the mask'. We were in Basel, singing for the students, in a circle around her and she did some funny songs, then 'The Three Ravens', then something funny again. And I was so moved I was almost in tears, and then the next song was so funny and I had to laugh. And she said, 'So how did I do this?' And I said [pretends to cry], 'Oh don't tell me, it was so beautiful!' And she gave me a hug and said, 'No, we HAVE to talk about it'. That's the secret: if I lose myself in a sad song, how can I be funny afterwards? I need to collect myself. I need to be able to make those changes of the mood. And for the audience it's fun to experience those changes because they CAN do it – they can lose themselves. So she said, it's about accepting the reality for that moment. I have the mask and I am sad. I put it on and I am honest. Something sounds through this mask – it's part of me but it's not me. And after this sad song is over I take a moment and put on another. But the mask does not mean that I am artificial. You just need some control.

Sometimes though, in concerts, the emotions are so strong, and afterwards I'm so exhausted mentally because I felt this energy that was there, but I am happy that it doesn't happen all the time. It's the most wonderful moment in music, but if it happened regularly I would go mad. I just did a series of four concerts and the last aria was 'Che farò senza Euridice' from *Orfeo*, and I was just in the mood and sang it so that I was almost in tears at the end, which rarely

happens with me. But while it happened I was thinking, 'Allow yourself to be a bit selfish now', like I was aware that I was drifting to this one side, that I had lost my balance, but I enjoyed it so much. Then the aria was over and there was silence in the hall for such a long time and I saw the people looking at me and I felt like there was something connecting me with everyone and I felt the collective soul. I don't know how that happened. And I was almost crying. And then when I bowed I started laughing and said to myself, 'Oh gosh, now look – you've moved yourself to tears!' And it was like, don't take yourself too seriously! But if that happened all the time it would just be emotionally too exhausting. Then you would be like Alanis Morissette, unloading her psychological trash in front of the audience, abusing the audience as a kind of garbage dump!

**As much as the singer has to think about his role in the music, the human being has to think about his role as a singer in life. And that is the key to develop the musical personality with all its different aspects**

**AC: Also, if you don't recognise that that is actually only going to happen only now and then, if you expect it to happen all the time, you would go crazy because it would become like a drug, and if it didn't happen, you would think yourself lost.**

AS: I remember when I did my first tour of St John's Passion and I did 'Es ist vollbracht', and I had goosebumps, and it just killed me almost. And the next concert I thought let's make that happen again, and it was there a bit but not as strong, and I thought what did I do wrong? But it's not to do with doing something wrong. And what I also learned was that not everything depends on me. Your part is to be ready as a singer. I was well prepared, I slept enough, I arrived for the rehearsal on time, I'm willing to sing and I give my best, and what comes out comes out. That's all I have to give and then sometimes we receive this little pinch of spirit and it makes us so happy, but we have no right to demand that every time.

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