

Inkinen has Ring of confidence ahead of Mahler's Third



David Kettle

Of course it would have been easier to play Dvořák's *New World Symphony*, which the orchestra can do with its eyes closed." Finnish conductor Pietari Inkinen is considering the many challenges of performing Mahler's massive *Third Symphony*, which he directs with the Prague Symphony Orchestra at Edinburgh's Usher Hall on 10 November, stop four in the ensemble's seven-concert tour of the UK.

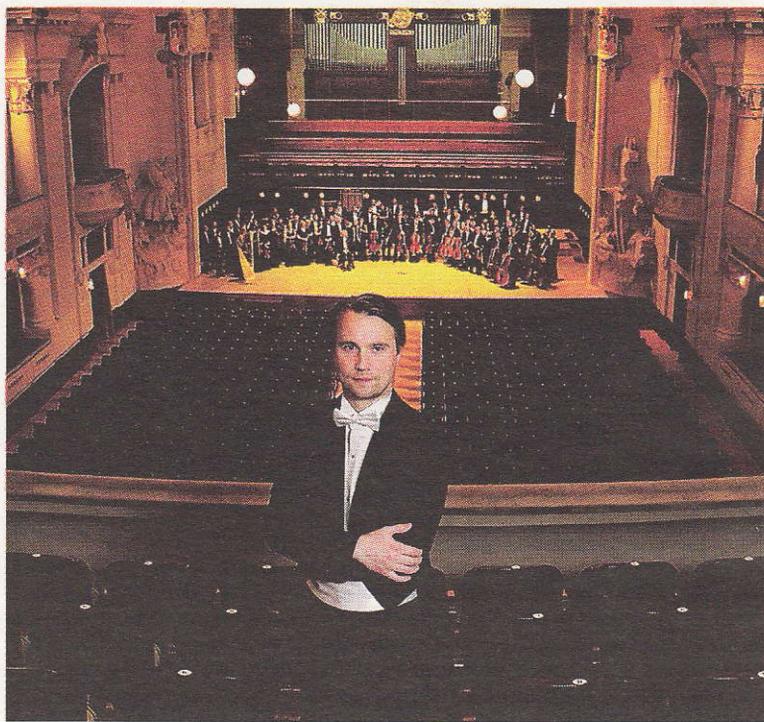
The *Third* is the longest in the composer's already gargantuan symphonic output, and with its women's and children's choirs – sourced locally at each stop (it's the Edinburgh Royal Choral Union, Edinburgh University Chamber Choir and the National Youth Choir of Scotland in Edinburgh) – plus offstage posthorn and drums, it's hardly the simplest piece to tour with.

"We need to rehearse thoroughly each time," says Inkinen, and check everything again and again and again. It makes for a tough schedule. But then again, when you tackle anything that's complex and challenging, the rewards are even greater."

Not yet 40, Inkinen is making significant waves on the international music circuit, as head of not just the Prague ensemble but also the Japan Philharmonic Orchestra and Deutsche Radio Philharmonie Saarbrücken – not to mention a summons to conduct Wagner's *Ring* at the composer's spiritual home in Bayreuth next summer. But more on that later – for the moment Inkinen is mulling over his love for Mahler.

"In many ways his music is so extreme," he explains, "and you can't tone it down. It has to go off the scale the whole time." You sense, in fact, that that's precisely what Inkinen most admires about the composer. "The *Third Symphony*, in particular, goes through an unbelievable spectrum of events and styles before ending with a maximum sense of jubilation," he says.

His Prague players, he feels, have a



Photograph: Jan Kollman

Finnish conductor Pietari Inkinen leads three orchestras around the world

natural affinity for this larger-than-life music. "If you compare my own background in a Nordic country, there's no question that the Prague players can deliver this music's almost unbelievable sentimentality almost automatically. They have a really nostalgic sound."

With the three international bands he heads, Inkinen admits he has a hectic schedule. But he'd rather have things that way than a succession of guest-conducting engagements.

"Of course my own orchestras are

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my priority," he says. "The better you get to know the players, and the better they know you, the better the results. You can never achieve the same in a single week as a guest conductor." What free slots he has, he says, he devotes to opera – "usually one per season, and recently it's turned out to be the longest ones in the repertoire: the *Ring*, *Die Meistersinger* and *Tannhäuser*."

Indeed, a conversation with Inkinen turns inevitably to Wagner, a composer he's clearly passionate about. "I think you're born loving Wagner," he chuckles. "Many musicians and listeners I know, in

fact, are completely nuts about him, total Wagner freaks, whereas there are others who really don't want to sit there for five hours and listen to him. And fair enough."

He has a wealth of experience in the pit with Wagner, too, giving multi-award-winning performances of the *Ring* in Melbourne in 2013 and 2016, as well as in Italy. "I've been conducting Wagner for many years now, and obviously Bayreuth had me on their radar. But it's the biggest honour in the business. Not many more than 30 people have ever done it in the whole of Bayreuth's history, so it's the most exclusive musical gang you can be part of.

"It's undoubtedly the highlight of my career, and of course I would have been thrilled at any time, but it's incredible that it's happening already."

Scaling such a musical summit so early inevitably raises the question: where next? Inkinen has clearly considered the matter carefully. "I want to conduct the Wagner operas I haven't done yet. Then, of course, there's always Richard Strauss. And as a Finn, Sibelius is in my blood – I believe we have something special to say about his music, and I will never stop playing it. There's so much good music to play that one lifetime simply isn't enough." ■

Pietari Inkinen conducts the Prague Symphony Orchestra at the Usher Hall, Edinburgh, on 10 November