

# curtainup

## TODAY'S CHOICE



### THEATRE EDINBURGH

SUMMERHALL, TODAY, 4PM  
WHEN he's not busy being the director of Summerhall, widely regarded as the Fringe's most exciting and cutting-edge new venue, Rupert Thomson is a playwright and performer. You can see him in action this afternoon, as he presents a meditation on his home city, described as "a bit like a cross between Jorge Luis Borges and a long night in the Royal Oak: some jokes, some ritualistic carry-on, lots of ideas".

0845 874 3001

### MUSIC BLAZIN' FIDDLES

BRUNTON THEATRE,  
TONIGHT AND TOMORROW,  
7:30PM  
THE band once memorably described as "the Led Zeppelin of the folk world" play two nights at the Fringe.

0131-665 2240



### COMEDY GREG PROOPS PODCAST

Valery Gergiev's motivation isn't fame or glory, but curiosity about other cultures. That's why he's glad to be part of the EIF, he tells **David Kettle**

**I**T'S JUST before he goes on stage to conduct Stravinsky and Tchaikovsky at the Aix en Provence festival that I finally get to speak to Valery Gergiev. Hardly the best time, perhaps, for him to focus his thoughts on the Brahms and Szymanowski symphony cycles he's bringing to Edinburgh this year. But, I'm assured, Maestro Gergiev has no pre-concert rituals and likes to be kept busy right up until the moment he steps onto the podium.

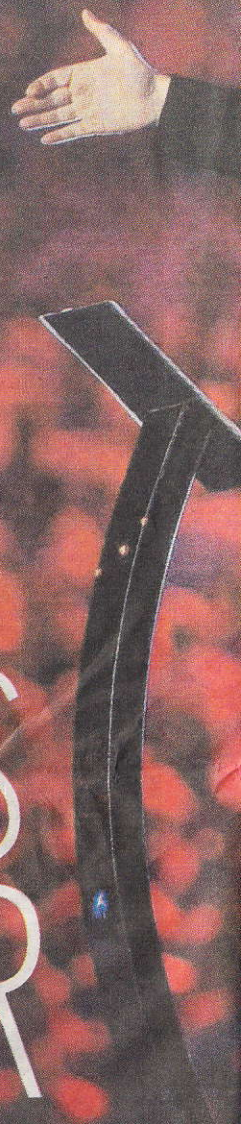
Which is just as well, because we're still talking just minutes before he's due in front of the orchestra. It does nothing to belie the reputation of a jet setting workaholic that he's gained over the last couple of decades, during which time he's led the Rotterdam Philharmonic, injected vital new life into St Petersburg's Mariinsky Opera, brought a welcome transparency to Moscow's Tchaikovsky Competition, and taken the helm at the London Symphony Orchestra - among numerous other projects.

One project is his recent appointment as the Edinburgh International Festival's honorary president - a responsibility he's clearly taken to heart with a run of Prokofiev's ballet *Cinderella* from his Mariinsky forces alongside a residency with the LSO at the festival this year.

But thankfully, when we speak, Gergiev's mind is very much on his EIF performances, especially the eyebrow-raising juxtapositions in his ambitious four-concert survey covering the four nobly Romantic symphonies of Brahms set against the four hot-headed, exotic symphonies of Szymanowski. "It's an interesting combination," he admits (that's something of an understatement). "I think I like contrasts - I don't like to stress how much composers have in common. I'm very experienced in unusual pairings, for ex-

**MAIN:** Conductor Valery Gergiev at the closing Ceremony of the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver, Canada; **BELOW:** Greek fiddler Leonidas Kavakos.

# THE CURIOUS CONDUCTOR





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**COMEDY  
GREG PROOPS  
PODCAST**

GILDED BALLOON TEVIOT,  
TONIGHT, 19 AND 22 AUGUST,  
10:30PM

AS featured on these pages  
earlier in the week, the  
improv star is at the Gilded  
Balloon for three nights  
only (in between doing  
his regular Fringe show at  
Assembly) to record new  
episodes of his acclaimed  
podcast in front of a live  
audience.

0131-622 6552

tomorrow



We reveal six more  
winners of the Scotsman's  
Fringe First awards.  
Plus Lee Randall meets  
Danny Wallace, ahead  
of his appearance at  
the Book Festival, and  
Susan Mansfield previews  
*Gulliver's Travels* at the EIF.

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That's just the description that the conductor Hans von Bülow gave to Brahms's first symphony way back in 1877, ten years after its first performance (he meant it as a compliment, but the composer took offence at the suggestion of plagiarism). And since then, Brahms's quartet of seminal symphonies have seldom been absent from the great conductors' repertoires. Gergiev has known them intimately since his student days: "Obviously all conductors grow up on Brahms, and even for me studying in St Petersburg, Brahms was my bread and butter, in the same way that Tchaikovsky and Béethoven were."

He cites several maestros from the past – Furtwängler, Toscanini, Walter, Klemperer, Mravinsky – whose Brahms performances he particularly admires. But he also admits that there was a time when it all got a bit too much. "I felt that if there was an announcement that there would be another performance of the Brahms symphonies, I would rather not go. Maybe 25 or 30 years ago, it became rather monotonous."

It's a surprising admission. What was it about Brahms performances at that time that he found unappealing? Gergiev smiles knowingly. "Aren't they sometimes too... bourgeois? You have the feeling that it's all so well packaged – it's like you eat a good breakfast, and then a good lunch, and then a solid dinner with good wine, and you're basically happy with everything. I've heard

# THE CURIOUS CONDUCTOR



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readings like this quite a few times." He won't give much away about what he intends for his Edinburgh Brahms cycle, but it sounds like he thinks it's time for a wholesale reassessment of the composer. For him, though, it won't be one based on theories of how music would have been performed in the composer's time. "I would never claim to take a historical approach with this kind of repertoire, with ideas like no vibrato, or everything over-articulated. There have been many interesting attempts to do this, but for me, overcooking is not something that Brahms should be known for."

Instead, he sees a certain freedom in performance as vital to a true understanding of the composer's music. "Every time you approach a Brahms symphony, you can play it quite differently. Even Brahms himself was famous for doing that. He surprised one of his soloists playing his violin concerto by thinking, why not move it all on a bit faster today? I don't think his music suffers if you use a certain degree of improvisation."

That freedom is certainly in keeping with the vivid, volatile performances that Gergiev is so renowned for. But does he feel the weight of history looming over him as he tackles such influential works? He's not unaware of the expectations that a Brahms cycle by someone of his international stature will raise, but modest enough to argue that he's simply concerned with giving good performances. "This cycle should not be a statement from me – it's just my understanding of the Brahms symphonies. They're already in a golden place, on all the world's musical

stages – I just want to enjoy them with my fantastic instrument, the LSO."

Gergiev accepts that the luscious music of Pole Karol Szymanowski is far less well known, even to himself. And he admits it was Edinburgh that first properly opened his eyes to it, with his 2008 performances of the composer's sensuous opera *King Roger*. "It was a totally unknown opera to us," he says. "But I think the orchestra found it amazing to play. They were really surprised by the piece, and how exciting it was." It was a risky undertaking – bringing a virtually unknown opera in a lavish Mariinsky production – but one that paid off, and no doubt brought the composer into the consciousness of many audience members as well.

So now it's time to delve deeper, Gergiev feels. He's lining up the composer's four symphonies – ranging from the exotic third with tenor soloist, named *Song of the Night*, to the brilliant fourth, a piano concerto in all but name – alongside those of Brahms, one of each per concert. There's contrast from Szymanowski's two voluptuous violin concertos, the first from Nicola Benedetti (who has made it her own since winning the BBC Young Musician title with it in 2004) and the second from hotshot Greek fiddler Leonidas Kavakos.

"I believe that for the recognition of Szymanowski's symphonies, it's important that we play them not just in Poland, but also in Britain, or Russia," Gergiev says. In terms of awareness, he compares Szymanowski now to the lack of recognition that Mahler suffered 50 years ago, and says that



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Picture: Jannica Honey

**'There's nowhere else you can drink for so many hours, speak to so many strange people...'**

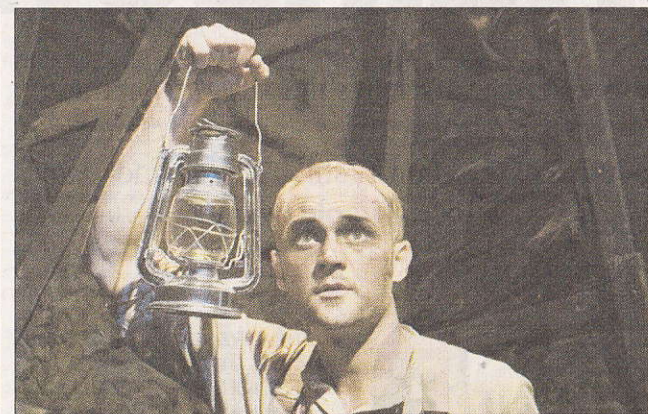
OLIVER LANSLEY OF LES ENFANTS TERRIBLES ON WHY HE KEEPS COMING BACK TO THE FRINGE.

THIS year marks my 11th consecutive Edinburgh with my company Les Enfants Terribles, and it's got me thinking... why do I keep coming back? I mean, it's cold, it's wet, there are so many hills, and sooo many actors. Every year it does its best to break me, financially, emotionally, physically and yet, ever since my first experience, (West at Assembly in 2002) I've been unable to resist her call... why?

I guess there's just something about the Fringe that gets under your skin. The Edinburgh Fringe is the biggest fringe festival on the planet. I've been fortunate enough to have performed at both the second largest (Adelaide), and the third (Brighton) – and while they both have their own individual charms (sun and beaches being high on that list) they just aren't comparable in terms of scale.

EdFringe is all consuming. There's nothing else like it in the world, nowhere you can drink for so many hours at so many bars, speak to so many strange people and see so much... stuff.

I use the word "stuff" as I can't think of one word to describe it. Over the years I've been blown away by such treats as



Fringe veterans Oliver Lansley and, below, Matthew Jones

Fringe. We've even invented our own LET award to try and help new theatre companies find their way up here. So let's celebrate her with all our hearts, or at least until the end of August, by which time we'll never want to see the bloody bitch again...

● *The Trench*, the new show from Les Enfants Terribles, is at the Pleasance Courtyard, 11:00pm, until 27 August.

**'After prancing around singing Kate Nash tunes, time for a curveball.'**

MATTHEW JONES OF FRISKY AND MANNISH ON TRYING SOMETHING A BIT DIFFERENT.

THIS year is my eighth Edinburgh Fringe. My first, in 2004, was in a student sketch show called *I Can't Believe It's Not Better* – unfortunately, the skits weren't as self-aware as the

back in 2009 with *Frisky and Mannish's School of Pop*, and experienced that most elusive thing – a bona fide Fringe "hit".

Now, *Frisky and Mannish* are on their fifth Fringe, playing a mix of vintage and box-fresh material at the 740-seater Assembly Hall for just eight shows. One comic said to us, "Ah! So you've already made it to the victory lap stage?" We laughed, and were secretly pleased. But it's not true. We made a purposeful decision not to do another whole new concept show.

It's great to feel established after our trilogy, but we also suspect that people may have written us off as only doing one thing – prancing around singing Kate Nash tunes. Now's the time to throw in a curveball.

So, alongside our "victory lap show", we're doing a darker, more experimental cabaret piece, based on the 27 Club. Anyone who finds our usual fare too frothy should check it out. It's well deep an' that





a greater knowledge of his music will bring the same rewards. "For us to understand European musical traditions without that knowledge, it's just not enough. And it will be interesting to see if what we're trying to do here will be followed."

He clearly sees himself as something of a trailblazer. "You are talking to a conductor who is more curious than ambitious," he explains. "But curiosity is very helpful, because it sometimes provokes interesting questions. This project has nothing to do with glorification or fame."

And, he adds, his ever-widening exploration of lesser-known culture is central to his position as EIF honorary president. "Edinburgh is the best festival in the world," he beams, "in terms of promoting the national cultures of so many dif-



ferent countries. Its focus came from after the Second World War, when the feeling shared by hundreds of millions of people was, let's somehow find how we are united. And of course that's through culture. That is still very resonant today, and that's why I wanted to become part of this spirit, which is shared by so many in Edinburgh."

Suddenly he has to make a dash for the stage. But he's neatly brought together his questing spirit, his pragmatic ambition and, of course, his commitment to Edinburgh. All that's left is to hear those qualities embodied in his vibrant performances.

● Valery Gergiev conducts the London Symphony Orchestra at the Usher Hall, tonight and tomorrow, 8pm, and 18-19 August, 7:30pm. [www.eif.co.uk](http://www.eif.co.uk)

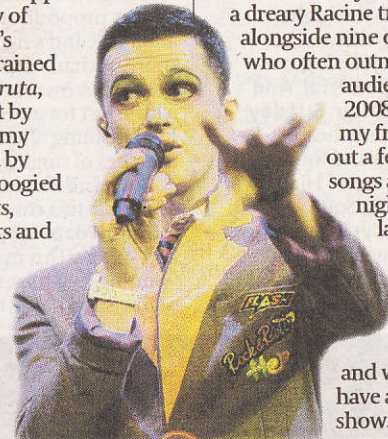
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I use the word "stuff" as I can't think of one word to describe it. Over the years I've been blown away by such treats as Steven Berkoff's powerhouse performance in *Requiem for Ground Zero*, had my heart broken by Camille O'Sullivan's husky rendition of *Rock and Roll Suicide*, been clambered over by a sweaty, naked Phil Nichol, been wrapped in the majesty of Daniel Kitson's story-telling, rained on at *Fuerzabruta*, been sworn at by puppets, had my ears pounded by beatboxers, boogied in spiegel tents, partied in lofts and libraries and purple cows.

Where else in the world could I do all these things?

I love the Edinburgh



until 27 August.

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In 2005, it was a cutesy kids' show called *I Was a Rat*, for which my flying duties consisted of breakdancing on the Royal Mile in a rat costume. In 2006, I had a monologue about rebel Babylonians in a dreary Racine tragedy

alongside nine other actors who often outnumbered the audience. Then in 2008, I came with my friend to try out a few parody songs at varied bill nights. At long last, we had a willing Fringe audience begging us for flyers, and we didn't even have a sodding show. So we came

laughed, and were secretly pleased. But it's not true. We made a purposeful decision not to do another whole new concept show.

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Alongside all this, I am appearing in a new play at the Underbelly called *Punch*, an entirely different beast again. It's a bleak two-hander, a very black comedy about comedy, and I get to try and be many things that Mannish is not – a stand-up comedian who is male, straight, Cockney and dangerous. It's an amazing piece of writing that I'm privileged to be in, and there's a big juicy twist.

In an ideal Fringe, all three would be smash hits. In reality, I'll settle for one hit, one audacious experiment, and one Marmite show.

● *Punch*, Underbelly Cowgate, 3:40pm until 26 August.  
*Frisky and Mannish: Extra-Curricular Activities*, Assembly Hall, 7:30pm until 26 August.  
*Frisky and Mannish: 27 Club*, Assembly George Square, 11:45pm 20-22 August.

# THE ASSEMBLY ROOMS



54 George Street | Edinburgh | 0844 693 3008 | [www.arfringe.com](http://www.arfringe.com)