

'If classical music isn't on TV, people won't get interested in it'

Bass-baritone Thomas Quasthoff says that people would watch classical music on television... if only the TV companies would give them the chance to do so

THE GERMAN BASS-BARITONE

Thomas Quasthoff, who turns 50 years old in November, is one of the world's best known singers. His career took off in 1988 when he won the ARD International Music Competition in Munich, and since then he has forged a reputation as an outstanding performer of Lieder and religious music. As an exclusive artist with Deutsche Grammophon, he has recorded repertoire ranging from Baroque to, recently, jazz and his 2005 Bach cantatas disc won the Vocal category in the BBC Music Magazine Awards. A fine communicator, he is currently a professor at the Hans Eisler Hochschule in Berlin, while this year sees him perform in five concerts as the Barbican's artist in residence.

'Music is the best thing in the world.

In what other activity do you find 2,000 people sitting next to each other and being peaceful? It's an amazing thing, too, to have them following on a journey with the artist on stage. To search out and do new things, either from performing or working with students, is also beautiful. I hope I never stop discovering about music even when I'm 80.'

'The problem with composer anniversaries is that you tend to get a flood of music.

This year, we've had a flood of Handel music, of Haydn music, of Purcell music and of Mendelssohn music. With my recordings, I got there a little bit earlier than everyone else. I published my Haydn arias disc last year, because I thought "Who's going to buy it when there's 50 other similar new discs from different artists?" You can't buy everything! I think it's a wrong decision to release such discs only in the anniversary year.'



RAISING THE BAR:
'We need to be so much more demanding'

'As long as the anniversary celebrations don't go over the top, however, I'm fine.

Haydn, Handel, Purcell and Mendelssohn were all great composers and they all deserve absolutely to be honoured, so that's all right. The Mozart year [in 2006], however, got really ridiculous. They had Mozart cakes and all sorts of other stuff. That was just bad!

'In Germany, we hear Purcell very rarely.

That's quite sad, as the music is undoubtedly very good. People are, however, possibly afraid of how to play it in the right way: "Do we do it with vibrato? Should we be doing it without? Is it OK to do it on modern instruments? Or should we be doing it on period ones?" I think that is more the fear. And yet nobody knows exactly how it was performed, especially when it comes to singing. And who knows whether the composers themselves would prefer what we now call the "period instrument" way of playing if given the choice?

'We have to adapt the older style of playing to modern halls.

Playing modern instruments with old bows makes sense, for instance. You get more sound. We have to remember that concerts in the past were played in much smaller halls. If you play a concert on old instruments in the Barbican or the Festival Hall, you can be pretty sure that those in the top rows won't hear anything at all. Or of course, we could go back to performing in smaller halls, but it's not my business to make that change – and besides, we singers are so expensive that we need big halls!

'Record companies sometimes think that people who buy CDs are more stupid than they really are.

That's my impression. It's a fact that companies will try and find a marketable title for a new recording but I'm not always convinced that using

such titles help to sell the disc, particularly in the case of established artists. I believe that people buy a recording because of the artist who is performing. In the case of, say, Christian Gerhaher [see p27], he could easily call an album just "Schubert and Schumann" and people will buy it because it is him.'

'You have the same problem with television too.

You only have to look at the quality of television today, but then the people responsible say that "People want this". I disagree! We need to be so much more demanding. On the ARD [the German television network], you don't find any classical music any more, even though it's written in the law that they have to educate people. Television is still the most important media – if classical music isn't on television, then people won't get interested in it.'

Interview by Jeremy Pound