

the DIRECTORS



Monkey and Simmonds

# Graham Sheffield

As the other half of a dynamic duo with John Tusa, he is widely credited with turning round a lacklustre venue. But the Barbican's artistic director has a nose or a premier cru, too, and a connoisseur's appreciation of the finer points of cricket.

**Simon Tait** goes to meet him

**G**raham Sheffield is a man of enthusiasms. His family, of course – his wife Ann and their two sons – is one. So is cricket, and as a member of the MCC he's at Lord's whenever his other enthusiasms (the word 'duties' seems somehow inappropriate in a man who gives the impression of never having done anything he didn't want to do) will allow.

Then there's wine. The highlight of last autumn for him was being invited to become a Chevalier du Tastevin de Bourgogne, a confrérie of wine lovers that likes to take such opportunities as the induction of a new confrere to dress up in gorgeous red and white voluminous robes. 'Going to Beaune, having a massive drink of fabulous wine and getting dressed up to look like a cross between Harry Potter and Cardinal Richelieu fills me with great joy,' he beams.

But Sheffield's first love has always been opera, and it's a largely unrequited one. Oh, he can see and hear as much live opera as he likes, and as a regular at the Coliseum, Covent Garden, Glyndebourne and every other opera venue, including these days his own Barbican Hall, he takes in a fair amount. But for Sheffield it is not enough simply to enjoy an opera, he has to be part of it.

'Well, I'm a classical musician,' he explains as we sit in his modest Barbican office over coffee and he, never quite still, fidgets with his latest toy, his Blackberry. 'I used to play piano – still do, but not in public – used to do a bit of conducting, used to be a timpanist. But what I wanted to be was an opera director.'

And he did it, once, at university where he presented Chabrier's comic piece *L'Etoile*. 'Absolutely loved it. But it sort of got away from me'.

The career of the eventual artistic director of the Barbican Centre whisked him off in other directions. He left Edinburgh University, where he'd studied music, to become a stage manager, then 'got syphoned' into the BBC as a music producer, 'so I never ended up fulfilling my dream of being the next Franco Zeffirelli'.

He went to the BBC in 1976 working on the music output for not only Radio 3 but Radio 4 and the World Service as well. In 1990 Nicholas Snowman at the South Bank Centre poached him to become music director, and he plunged into some of the most edgy projects with festivals from Berio to Carter to Purcell.

It was Sheffield who started the South Bank's summer Melt-down festivals, kicking off in 1993 with George Benjamin as the first 'curator' and progressing to Louis Andriessen and later Elvis Costello.

He is a paradox, on one hand the most self-possessed of men, comfortably aware of his own capabilities, and on the other there's a sense of bewilderment at the posts he's been given custodianship of: 'Each job I've done somebody has taken me on trust,' he says. 'Before I went to the BBC I'd never been in a studio before, I'd never worked in a concert hall until I went to the SBC, and here they took a risk on me and theatre.'

That point being that when he stepped into the then brand new post of arts director, as it was then called, the Barbican was experiencing an upheaval that many saw as seismic – and not merely that its managing director was an interregnum after the departure of Baroness Detta O'Cathain, with the new full-time one not yet appointed. No, the crisis was the aftermath of the bombshell dropped by the Royal Shakespeare Company, custodians of the Barbican Theatre since it opened in 1982 (in fact, designers of it).

Sheffield was in a call box in the middle of Dartmoor in the summer of 1995 when Bernard Harty, the acting MD as well as being town clerk and chamberlain of the Corporation of London, owners and funders of the Barbican, said he wanted to offer Sheffield the new post, but that before he committed himself he should be aware that the RSC had said they intended to leave the Barbican for six months of each year from 1997.

'I said "Great, fantastic, I'll do it," he recalls. 'I'd already sensed that if we could get into the theatre we could begin to do something along the lines of what turned out to be BITE (the international theatre season which has now become year-round programming).

'The RSC's going – part one in 1997 and then part two when they left completely in 2002 – was the single largest catalyst of the revival of the centre,' he says. 'It enabled us to move from being simply a presenting house to becoming a real producing house, which we've done since 2003 with *Black Rider* (Robert Wilson's play) and now Deborah Warner's *Julius Caesar*'.

In what is sometimes the way of corporations the timetable was rather tortuous, the RSC announcement promoting the need to appoint an arts chief ahead of the choosing of a new chief executive, but at the same time the new programmer was being expected to go into the job blind, not knowing who he would be working to.

It wasn't quite so farcical as that. Sheffield was, indeed, appointed before his future boss, and he may even have known that the former newsreader and managing director of BBC World Service, John Tusa, was to get the job before Tusa himself did. 'Well, I had an inkling of a few of the names and I was happy with all of them – I would have been crazy to have taken the job on if there was a chance of having someone up there I knew I wouldn't be able to work with.'

“ Having a massive drink of fabulous wine and getting dressed up to look like a cross between Harry Potter and Cardinal Richelieu fills me with great joy ”

A couple of months later Sir John Tusa arrived, and together they took on the task of making the Barbican's idiosyncratic building, if not exactly loveable, into a production house for music, theatre and dance, with now three cinemas and a visual arts venue that can put its shows lucratively on the road now, with the foyers opened and demystified and the culmination being the opening of the new Silk Street entrance this summer.

All this despite the familiar year-on-year chafing over funding levels – all the subsidy comes from the City of London, and Tusa has lately been arguing for an Arts Council grant as befits a national flagship, rather than the local authority facility the Barbican formally is.

Sheffield has subtly moved his own job away from that municipal feel by changing his title from 'arts director', which sounds rather like a principal officer, to 'artistic director', a title producers and performers understand.

The programming Sheffield imposed on a then rather paranoid arts centre was to help Tusa push the upgrading of an unloved pile, and it was only when Sheffield was able to persuade the corporation to go with an international season for music, theatre and opera that he realised they were going to have to put an orchestra pit and sprung floor in the theatre, then that the hall needed upgrading, that the arts gallery was a disgrace, that film was not being well enough served, that dance was excluded.

'Getting the theatre into our control started the whole renewal of the centre's physical spaces – the theatre, the concert hall, then the art gallery, now the cinemas now foyers and then the entrance later this year. So if the RSC hadn't started to go we wouldn't have started to rethink.'

And the RSC won't be coming back, not in the foreseeable future. 'We're not going to sign another 17-volume residency agreement with someone like the RSC because, actually, we enjoy freedom of being able to put on whatever we want,' he says, adding in the manner of a statutory copyright statement: 'But there's absolutely no animosity.'

He started with just the concert hall and cinema in his control. There was no education programme, the art gallery was run by a different department in the corporation, the RSC had the theatre, there was no sponsorship department at all, and marketing was run separately. Sheffield had to create a team of artistic programmers – music director Robert van Leer was his first appointment and is still there – but was at such a loss over what to do

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with the theatre that he rang up West End producer Thelma Holt. 'She was very helpful,' he says, non-committally.

In 1998 came the huge Inventing America festival which, he says, put the Barbican on the map artistically. 'Then we started the process of trying to build on events with a lot more of thematic festivals, a bigger jazz programme, a bigger world music programme with festivals built around those.'

Then they had to finish the improvements to the hall's acoustic started by Larry Kirkegaard, so that now they can welcome orchestras like Berlin's, Vienna's and Amsterdam's which had shunned them before. Resident more as a lifelong friend than a lodger is the LSO, now under the administration of another old friend, Kathryn McDowell, with the BBC Symphony Orchestra added three years ago, apparently seamlessly, to bring a new edge to the programming.

'We've done our damndest to turn it into a silk purse,' he says. 'People were writing off the Barbican, saying "What on earth are you going to do with the theatre?" There were various ideas floating around like, doing regional theatre all the time, selling it to a West End management, and I said, really, "No". John supported the idea and we went in to the corporation together saying this is what we need to do.'

Even one senior former director of the RSC said international theatre couldn't be done because there was not enough interesting work out there. But BITE was born, shifting the oddly unique place nearer to the edge, where Sheffield likes to be.

As his innovations at the Barbican bed down, Sheffield has taken on a new enthusiasm as the newly elected chairman of the Royal Philharmonic Society, whose council he joined in 1999. The RPS, of course, is the second oldest musical society in the world, founded in 1813, and it famously commissioned Beethoven's ninth symphony. It seemed an anachronism until Tony Fell effectively turned it over to the membership and made it properly representative of musicians and of classical music.

Sheffield's mission is to build on it. 'Classical music is my base and I can make a difference there: if we can really move classical music making up through the national agenda, then let's have a go,' he says.

'We can become quite a powerful independent voice for classical music in the country because we're not beholden to any particularly part of the industry. We can speak out – classical music is very far from being on its last legs, it certainly ain't here [at the Barbican].'

'It's unfashionable in certain circles. Well, the Barbican was unfashionable in certain circles ten years ago and now we're told we're a cool venue, and we haven't compromised our artistic standards in the process.'

And then what? Still only 53, Sheffield is being mentioned as the natural successor to Tusa when he retires next year. He is also increasingly linked with the Edinburgh Festival, to take over from Sir Brian McMaster when he retires later this year.

But he has no sense of being in a run-down period at the Barbican. 'There's still an awful lot to do,' he says, slightly testily at the inference that he might have completed his to-do list. 'If we're at the top of our game remaining there is a challenge in itself, and then we've got big plans for our 25th next year.'

'But we're seriously building up to the Olympics in 2012. We want the Barbican and City to be major players, because the games will be largely on the north-east side of London and we're a natural funnel, so we must be ready for that. I want to double the education programme, get a lot more work in the art gallery – we can earn more money and reputation from touring art gallery shows around.'

'We want to build up the quality of ideas we produce, and building the Barbican as an arts brand has further to go. So I don't get a sense that I'm getting bored with nothing else to do.'

### Directions

Born 12 February 1952  
1963-70 Tonbridge School  
1979 Edinburgh University  
1980 Married Ann Morton  
1976-90 BBC, music producer at Radio 3  
1990-95 Music Director, South Bank Centre  
1995-present Artistic Director, Barbican Centre

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