

## THIS CULTURAL LIFE

GRAHAM  
SHEFFIELD

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The artistic director of  
the Barbican says that  
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a lot of it isn't very good



MORLEY VON STERNBERG

**What was your cultural passion at 14?**  
I can still see myself lying on the floor in my study at boarding school 40 years ago, listening to Brahms symphonies. I went through my Brahms phase that long ago.

It's not that I don't like Brahms now, it's that I've gone on to much more catholic and radical things since then. I certainly won't put on an old Brahms record now.

**What do you cling on to from childhood?**  
The first thing I ever wanted to be was an archaeologist - I always loved classical civilisation. I studied classics up to A-level. There's so much one can learn from them: it's got all the sex and violence but cloaked in this wonderful civilisation.

**What are you reading in bed at the moment?**  
I've just finished *Arno, Arno, Arno* by Harry Mount which is like a cross between *1066 and All That* and Kennedy's *Latin Primer*. It's an absolutely brilliant book, so witty and informative, but a really serious book too. I'm moving on from that to *The Rise of Modern Philosophy* by Anthony Kenny. He's one of those rare beasts who is a real expert on a subject but who can write in a way which can appeal to the layman. I'm also an Ian Rankin aficionado, and I'm planning to read his latest, *The Naming of the Dead*.

**What book have you been meaning to read since you bought it?**  
I bought a fairly new translation of Dante's *Inferno* about a year ago and haven't got round to it. My time for reading is limited apart from holidays and long-haul flights. I try to find a time when I really get into a book rather than just toying with it.

**What music are you listening to at the moment?**  
I don't do much CD listening these days because I go to so many live events: four or five a week. But I am going through a Brad Mehldau phase. He's a wonderful jazz pianist who's appearing here later this year. He really understands the instrument and also has an amazing grasp of classical music.

**What is the least disposable pop song?**  
There has to be only one answer, not the most original, but the Beach Boys' *Pet Sounds* album, particularly "God Only Knows". It did so much for the next generation of musicians, and is certainly not disposable because it was so influential.

**Do you regret not being able to get Brian Wilson to the Barbican?**  
The Festival Hall cornered him a few years ago. We've put on a few ageing pop stars in our time. I remember when I came here 10 years ago and the place was a bit stuck in the mud and we put on Procul Harum for a night. They were old then - and that was 10 years ago!

**What is your ideal alternative job?**  
Running Chateau Lafite. I have a nose for wine that's larger than my pocket. I have a modest cellar but a lot of the wines I was able to afford 10 years ago I can't now. It's gone crazy. All the boutique wines are bought by merchant bankers. Normal wine lovers have to look elsewhere for their drinking pleasure.

**And the realistic alternative?**  
Running the opera festival in Aix en Provence. It's such a beautiful location,

great restaurants and close to some fantastic wineries and to the Mediterranean.

**Do you have a hole in your cultural life?**  
I have a real blank spot with Bruckner symphonies and Hindemith, and also 95 per cent of stand-up comedy. The really good comedians, Jack Dee and people like that, are very funny. It's like the old European wine lake of 20 years ago: the best is wonderful but there's an awful lot that isn't terribly good.

**Do you have a secret cultural passion?**  
To conduct an orchestra again. I used to do some conducting at university and I've long hankered to do some more. I'm a trained musician with a music degree. My real secret cultural passion would be to conduct our resident orchestra (the London Symphony Orchestra), but they'd never allow me to do it.

**Which cultural item would you like to steal?**  
I'd love to steal the Acropolis. Is that allowed? It would look wonderful here on the Barbican estate somewhere. It was a toss-up between that and Duchamp's urinal.

**Which painting most corresponds with your vision of yourself?**  
A major canvas by Jackson Pollock, one of the really big drippy ones, because it's colourful and diverse and it matches my eclectic tastes. People think, oh they're just paint splashed about. But they had a really carefully thought-out structure, which is very subtly worn. And that's a knack which I like to think I've got, that I can make the Barbican Arts Centre

work with all its diversity and yet not wear that too heavily.

**If you could tear down any building in the world, what would you choose?**  
I hate bland buildings that are just fillers. So I'd tear down the Sainsbury Wing of the National Gallery, partly because Prince Charles likes it, and partly because it's so bland, a cop-out. And also Portcullis House. I think Michael Hopkins is a much better architect than that building would suggest. It doesn't really say anything about modern democracy, or the fact that London is one of the finest cities for modern architecture.

**Who should play you in the Hollywood version of your life? And who would be your nemesis?**  
One or two people said that I used to resemble Dudley Moore. So why not Dudley at his best, partly because he was a such a great humorist, a fantastic actor and a much better pianist than I will ever be. My nemesis would be Uma Thurman in her yellow tracksuit as the bride in *Kill Bill*.

**You die and go to heaven. Who would you like to meet in the bar and what question would you ask them?**

I came down to a shortlist of three: Leonardo da Vinci, Bach, but, in the end, it has to be Shakespeare. He's still a relatively shadowy figure. My question to him is bound to be, "Have you written any new sonnets lately?"

Interview by Mike Higgins

The Barbican is hosting over 100 events from 21 Feb to celebrate its 25th anniversary: [barbican.org.uk/25](http://barbican.org.uk/25)