

ARTS

RICK JONES

STANDING ORDERS

Members of the Manchester Camerata perform on their feet, not sitting. Under their brilliant new director, they are marking out a distinctive role in Britain's musical life

Counting the numbers who attend church on a Sunday has never been a very reliable guide to religiosity. During the first Elizabeth's reign, non-attendance at church was punished with a fine of 12 old pence, roughly the equivalent of a speeding charge, so the near-universal attendance then would have signified nothing more than compliance. Equally, there are many today who, renouncing church worship, find spiritual value not in doctrinaire religion but in art, giving, if not actually tithing, of their incomes to afford the sacred benefit of plays, exhibitions or concerts.

Lent has always been an occasion for appropriate concerts, and performances of the Bach Passions in secular venues will be common fare from now until Easter. Handel saw a market in extra-ecclesiastical religion and composed most of his oratorios for Lent audiences.

And if anyone needed prodding towards the idea of music as worship, the Manchester Camerata has labelled its Holy Week concert this year (Wednesday 4 April) "Portrait of Faith". It includes two overtly religious Bach cantatas, an anonymous epitaph for a young woman in Beethoven's *Elegischer Gesang*, and two textless orchestral works by John Tavener (*Eternal Memory*) and Arvo Pärt (*Summa*).

The man behind the programming is its new music director Gábor Takács-Nagy, whom I meet after an exhilarating concert in Manchester's elegant Bridgewater Hall. There is great pride in the 40-year-old orchestra's reputation. The people around the maestro tell me to think of the Camerata not as Manchester's third orchestra, but as one of the city's three. The Hallé and the BBC Philharmonic are bigger, but, as I discover, the Camerata is lithe, versatile and intimate, an expanded quartet rather than a reduced symphony orchestra, just as the founding violinist of the Takács String Quartet would like it.

"I am not a religious man," says Takács-Nagy, "but music to me is spiritual." I ask him what he means and he cites the previous night's fiery, volatile performance of Haydn's

last symphony. "In the Haydn, I notice we have some problems with synchronicity, but the players are open to it and they adjust. I live dangerously. This was how the Takács Quartet played - improvising in the concert. We had accidents but there was always this dilemma: on the one hand we want perfection, but, on the other, spontaneity. This is what I mean. It's about living the moment. Yesterday it was not totally perfect, but it was spiritual."

He describes the "Portrait" concerts - there are portraits also of Love, War and "An Englishman" - as basically a marketing concept. He tries to capture the spiritual in all music, clearly not just in those programmes which have a religious provenance. He loves the feeling that he is shaping a living entity in the music.

He conducts without a baton, moulding, as it were, the clay of sound between his fingers. I ask him whether he conducts every orchestra in this way. "I never use a baton," he replies, "but this is not from choice. It is because of an injury to my arm and thumb. This is why I had to leave the quartet. I could no longer hold a bow and I cannot hold a stick."

Being struck down at the height of a brilliant career - the Takács Quartet was and still is one of the world's greatest ensembles - was a cruelty that shocked the music world in the early 1990s. Takács-Nagy darkens at the memory. "I tried conducting and could only learn in this way. But there are others, Gergiev and Boulez, for instance, who also prefer only hands. A baton is more precise, especially for the wind, who sit further away. They need to see when the down beat is arriving. But hands are less formal than stick and help to give this volatile feel. They are not giving every detail, not dividing the bars, but giving players their own power. If I am not conducting every beat, the players feel they have more control. I can leave the pulse to them and be more responsible for the overall effect. Also, standing up helps this. This is the first time that an orchestra stands up with me."



Music director Gábor Takács-Nagy with members of the Manchester Camerata: 'Music to me is spiritual'

The players, with the exception of the cellos, had performed the Haydn on their feet, balancing on their toes, so that one had the sense of the music passing through the floor and into the musicians like an electric current. The theory, which seems to work, is that everyone performs with more energy and alertness than they do sitting. Takács-Nagy's dynamic leader, Giovanni Guzzo, led the fray, bobbing and weaving with the beat and infecting those behind him with visible enthusiasm.

Guzzo too is new, brought in like a disciple by the conductor to lead the otherwise young local players. "We weren't exactly a package, but when I arrived I let it be known he is an exceptional player," explains Takács-Nagy. "He is phenomenal, charismatic. He also works for the Budapest Festival Orchestra for 10 weeks every year, as I do. We share the same musical language. He makes changes and is doing a lot of talking with the strings about speeds and bowing."

Takács-Nagy is an engaging conductor who creates a rapport with audiences. He comes on with a microphone like an evangelical preacher. "Hungary never won a war," he says of his country introducing works by Bartók and Kodály, "we are too amiable. But there is fire and passion in our music."

He certainly has more wit. Laughter breaks through his Hungarian seriousness. "Our national anthem begins, 'O God, give us a good mood and prosperity,'" he quotes with a sombre churchgoer's face. "It must be the only national hymn that starts from a position of gloom!"