

# Dausgaard's Bartók series will take SSO back to composer's roots



David Kettle

He's worked on a farm in China, sought out head-hunting tribes in Borneo, lived with villagers on a remote South Pacific island, even taken his family to learn Aboriginal arts in Australia. All, BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra chief conductor Thomas Dausgaard has explained, to "find the roots of where we come from, and to explore the things we share across cultures".

It's a remarkable list of adventures – especially from a continent-hopping international conductor. And one who, alongside heading the BBC SSO, is also chief conductor of the Swedish Chamber Orchestra, and in 2019 becomes music director of the Seattle Symphony Orchestra. It's a wonder he has time for it all.

But given Dausgaard's restless personal explorations, it's no surprise that one of his big themes across the current BBC SSO season is to explore the roots of music, and where composers get their ideas from – ideas he has brought together under the series title *Composer Roots*. "I like to find out about the possible roots of inspiration for composers – what makes their pens move," Dausgaard explains. "What other music, or even types of music, could be their underlying or subconscious inspirations?"

Dausgaard's explorations take him way beyond the classical canon. The series might have kicked off last autumn with Beethoven's Ninth, couched among music by Bach, Handel, Haydn and Mozart that no doubt influenced it. Next week, however, it continues with a very different composer, one who devoted much of his life to folk music. Béla Bartók famously spent years painstakingly cataloguing the traditional music of his native Hungary and much further afield, and its influence permeates his own music on every possible level – its driving, sometimes quirky rhythms; its unconventional twists of melody; its brightly coloured, sometimes ear-tweaking harmonies. But, explains Dausgaard, Bartók's folk connections



Photograph: Per Morten Abrahamsen

Thomas Dausgaard: 'My love for Bartók's music began when I was very young'

are more complex than they might at first seem.

"His relationship with folk music is often misunderstood," he says. "At the beginning of his life as a composer, he used folk idioms in a supposedly 'gypsy' style, very much in the vein of Liszt – it's probably what he would have heard in cafes and on street corners in Budapest, thinking it really was Hungarian folk music. But it was fellow composer Zoltán Kodály who took Bartók to rural areas to discover the non-commercial and deeply authentic, living tradition of Hungarian peasant folk music. That coloured Bartók's later period as a composer."

He's a composer that Dausgaard clearly feels strongly about himself.

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"My love for Bartók's music began when I was very young and played his music for children. Later I remember doing a talk on his Second Violin Concerto and Hungarian Sketches for my 6th grade class. I was fascinated by him."

That fascination continues across the generous three concerts that Dausgaard devotes to Bartók, each focusing on a different aspect of his output, as he explains. "We want to show the inspiring, rich diversity of it. In the first concert we perform the First Violin Concerto, which has a late Romantic side to it, including some Richard Strauss-like moments,

and the Second Violin Rhapsody, which involves peasant and gypsy music." His soloist for the opening concert is Budapest-born Barnabás Kelemen, an extraordinarily earthy, passionate player who's sure to bring some authentic Magyar fire to his performance. "Synthesis dominates the third concert with the Third Piano Concerto and the Concerto for Orchestra," Dausgaard continues, nodding to two late works in which the raw edges of Bartók's earlier evocations have been somewhat smoothed.

It's in Dausgaard's second concert, however, that audiences get to compare Bartók's folk interpretations with the original material – and to delve properly into the music's roots. "There we're going to play some of his recomposed peasant music, alongside singer Nóri Kovács and the Hungarian band Parapács, who will be performing their traditional arrangements of the same music. I hope these Hungarian musicians will bring us an authenticity that can inspire us when we perform, and also inspire the audience listening to us. It will also give a glimpse into how Bartók himself might have heard the music."

With *Composer Roots* concerts focusing on Rachmaninov, Sibelius and fellow Dane Carl Nielsen to come later in the BBC SSO's season, Dausgaard's ceaseless curiosity is clearly far from over. ■

Thomas Dausgaard conducts the BBC SSO in its three Bartók *Composer Roots* concerts at Glasgow City Halls on 22 February, 25 February and 1 March, see [www.bbc.co.uk/bbcso](http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbcso) for more details.