

How a brief encounter turned into a long-term affair for Chan



David Kettle

It was a really intense time – and a very intense dose of the RSNO! But it cemented my feeling that, yes, I wanted to do this again.” Hong Kong-born conductor Elim Chan is looking back to the start of 2017, and to the unusually concentrated beginnings of her relationship with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra – which she returns to, now as principal guest conductor, at the start of November.

Chan is unquestionably one of the classical world's fastest-rising stars. She's still young but heavily in demand, having cut her teeth with two of the most eminent names in the business: Valery Gergiev at the London Symphony Orchestra and Gustavo Dudamel at the Los Angeles Philharmonic. She's been chief conductor of Sweden's Norrlands Opera, and from 2019 becomes chief conductor of the Antwerp Symphony Orchestra. And she's a remarkably energetic, vibrant presence on the podium, a figure who clearly made a big impression on the RSNO last year – even if she might not have realised it at the time.

Her RSNO experience began with two smaller-scale concerts in January 2017. “I remember the soloist was Ana Cordova, the RSNO's principal bass – it was this ‘girl power’ moment because both of us were out front.” Her second batch of concerts came unexpectedly just two weeks later, when she stepped in for an indisposed Neeme Järvi in what were supposed to be his 80th birthday celebrations. “That was literally the only free week I had during a large chunk of work,” Chan recalls. “I remember thinking: should I really take this? But it was too good to turn down. It's strange how the universe sometimes has things lined up for you. I had that feeling that I was being called back, that I should be there.”

But despite the quick rebooking, Chan found it hard to judge the RSNO players' reaction to her. “Because we were so focused on the work, I remember thinking: did they even enjoy it? Different orchestras have different personalities – some give so



Elim Chan is returning to work with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra

much feedback that it's obvious they like you, but with others you can't tell. As we were getting closer to the concerts, the musicians came up to me and said they enjoyed my work, which was a great relief.”

In fact, the RSNO liked Chan so much that they snapped her up as principal guest conductor (a role left open when its previous occupant, Thomas Søndergård, stepped up to become the RSNO's music director) on the strength of just those two groups of concerts. What Chan has planned for her opening gig takes its inspiration

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from those earlier performances. “When I stepped in last year, we did Rachmaninov's Second Symphony, and Russian music has somehow become my calling card, so we're starting my concerts this season with Rachmaninov's Symphonic Dances – one of my favourite pieces, and also a great piece to showcase the orchestra.”

Looking further ahead, Chan is keen to balance her own development with expanding and developing the orchestra's skills. “It's good to celebrate our existing strengths,” she explains, “but I'm also hoping to explore things that are new

to us both.” Such as? “I'd love to bring in some more contemporary composers, so we can explore their music – I've been discussing Jörg Widmann, for instance, and there are great women composers I'm hoping to explore too.”

Indeed, the under-representation of women in classical music is something that's unavoidably on Chan's mind. “I don't like to scream about it. I hope things are getting better now. Many orchestras are opening up, and have an urge and a passion to work with women as conductors, performers and composers. It's great for me and my colleagues. But we have to keep up the quality, too, and then the wheel will keep moving forwards.”

But returning to her ambitions for the RSNO, playing a role in the orchestra's touring activities is another of them. “Of course Thomas has priority in terms of taking the orchestra on tour, but if I can be involved, or help the orchestra's profile internationally, I'd love that.” Does she have any destinations in mind? “I'm originally from Hong Kong, but my whole education and career has basically been in the West. It's strange to say this, but I'd like to have more presence in Asia. To tour there with the RSNO, or work there myself at some point – that's my secret dream.” ■

Elim Chan conducts Dukas, Chopin and Rachmaninov with the RSNO on 1-3 November in Dundee, Edinburgh and Glasgow