

For Rattle, things look up as he looks ahead

New contract extends his time in Berlin By [David Weininger](#)



Sir Simon Rattle and the Berlin Philharmonic are on a tour that comes to Symphony Hall on Sunday. (Monika Rittershaus)

As Sir Simon Rattle arrived in America this week to begin a fall tour with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, he did so with a little extra job security. Earlier this month, he signed a contract extension that will keep him at the Philharmonic as principal conductor until 2018. Rattle was once known as a young dynamo of the podium; his new contract will keep him in Berlin almost into senior citizenship.

“It’s quite a big stash of time we have,” says Rattle by phone from New York, the first stop on a tour that reaches Symphony Hall on Sunday. And since the Philharmonic is a self-governing body, “this is the orchestra’s choice - it’s their choice and it’s their fault if it doesn’t work. It’s sometimes a difficult thing to live in a democracy, but then you do know that at the end of it, you have a mandate. The orchestra has decided that this is what they want to do. This is their future.”

The Philharmonic’s last concert in Boston was a memorable one - a 2007 performance that featured a profoundly beautiful reading of Mahler’s “Das Lied von der Erde.” That was Rattle’s first visit to Boston since 2000, and it marked the reawakening of a relationship between him and the city that had once seemed touched with destiny. Rattle had been a frequent and prized guest conductor with the Boston Symphony Orchestra throughout the 1980s and ’90s, and there were whispers that he was being groomed as Seiji Ozawa’s successor. And then the visits simply stopped; some kind of rupture seemed to have occurred.

“Yes, even I heard some of those,” Rattle says with a laugh when asked about the succession rumors. “A bit cloak and dagger it was.” He acknowledges that “things were a bit tense, and it was not necessarily so easy with all the rumors running around. And we thought, we should probably give this a break.”

When Rattle arrived in Berlin in 2002, he was seen as the conductor who would bring one of Europe’s most venerated yet tradition-bound orchestras into the 21st century. But tensions

FRANK SALOMON ASSOCIATES

121 West 27th Street, Suite 703, New York, NY 10001

tel: 212.581.5197; fax: 212.581.4029; e-mail: info@franksalomon.com www.franksalomon.com

surfaced quickly. In 2004, an article in the German paper Welt am Sonntag said the partnership had reached “a marital crisis.” Around the same time, Rattle himself referred to the collaboration as “turbulent.”

“Look, it changes and develops all through time,” he says now of his relationship with the orchestra. “Somehow we’ve got the honeymoon and the opposite of the honeymoon over with. Now we can really set down and make what I hope is the kind of music we ought to be making.

“As self-willed and as difficult as they can be sometimes, there is no moment when they come and say, ‘Oh God, it’s just Brahms’ Fourth again,’ ” he continues. “There is utterly no sense of routine here. And that is a treasure beyond price.”

And it’s a good thing, because it’s all about Brahms right now. EMI has just released excellent new recordings of the four symphonies, which on this tour are being paired with music by Schoenberg. The Philharmonic’s legacy with the Brahms symphonies is long, reaching back to the composer’s lifetime. That history casts long shadows - right down to instructions from Rattle’s predecessors that are still visible on the parts sitting on the musicians’ stands.

“Tradition and memory are wonderful things,” Rattle says, “but as Bruno Walter said, the remembered performance is the most dangerous one. Because it’s never real. It’s never been properly put together. It’s a memory of which everyone has a different corner.”

The orchestra recently defied tradition when it launched its Digital Concert Hall, a webcast in high-quality audio and video of every subscription concert in the Philharmonie. It’s a risk, and an expensive one. “But because the idea came from us all together, everybody felt for once, damn it, let’s go with this. This is too important. I think it’s the future of the recording industry.”

Rattle is especially glad to be reconnecting with Boston. He nourishes fond memories of the orchestra - “I had the best time there, I tell you” - and especially of Symphony Hall. He found the 2007 concert so satisfying that “all of us in Berlin felt, we have to play there again.

“That is the greatest hall in America - there is no doubt,” he says. “It has a kind of mystery in the sound. And it has a way of encouraging you, when you’re on stage, to give your best. You feel, now I can take this risk. I can do something more extraordinary, I can play quieter. The hall will take me and lift it over the front of the stage.”

Presented by Celebrity Series of Boston; 617-482-6661, www.celebrityseries.org

FRANK SALOMON ASSOCIATES

121 West 27th Street, Suite 703, New York, NY 10001

tel: 212.581.5197; fax: 212.581.4029; e-mail: info@franksalomon.com www.franksalomon.com