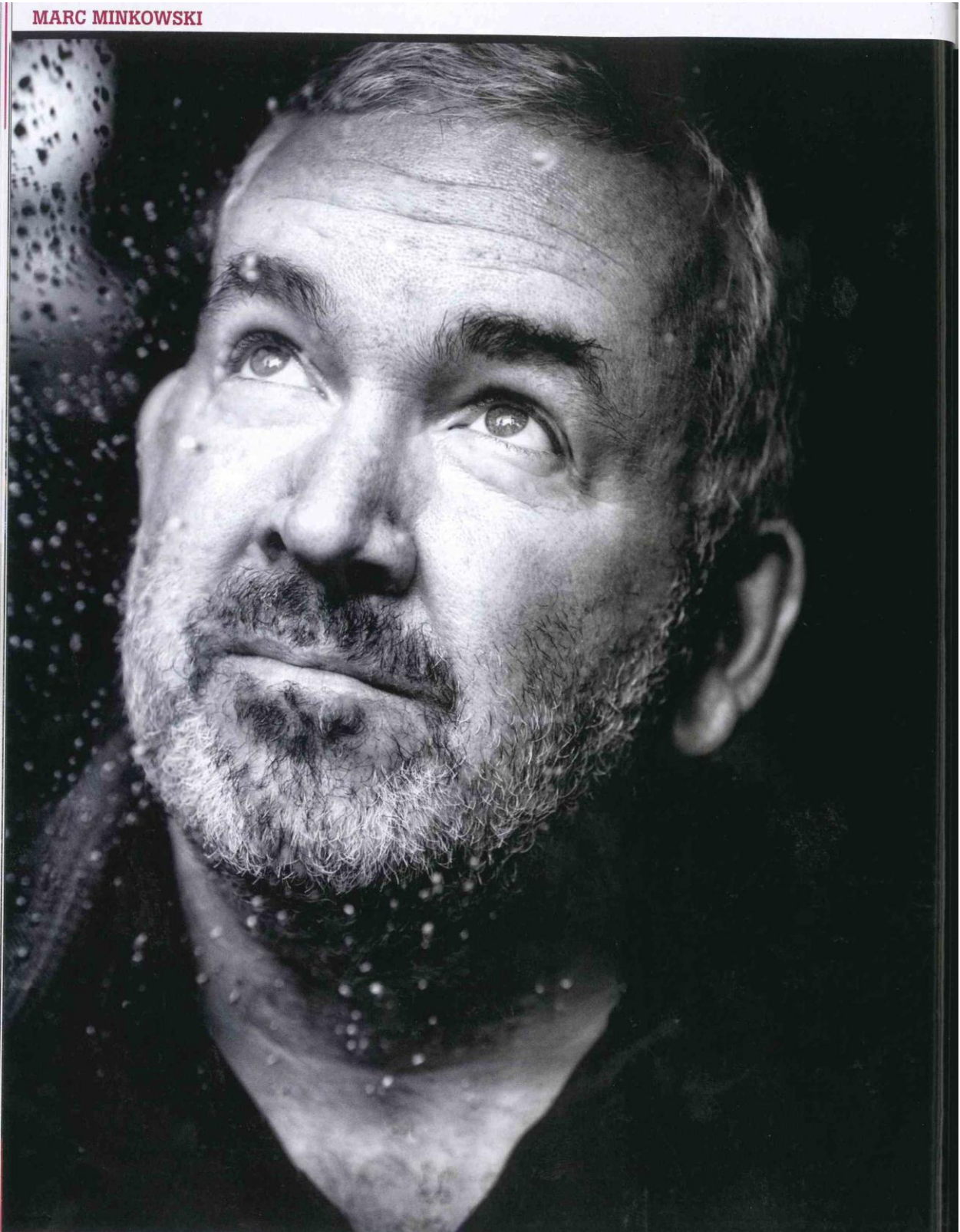


MARC MINKOWSKI



# The making of Marc

His orchestra, Les Musiciens du Louvre-Grenoble, is 30 years old this year and he takes over the artistic directorship of one of Salzburg's many festivals early next year. Marc Minkowski chats to Toby Deller in Paris

**Y**ou are as likely to hear his orchestra playing 19th-century French music as that of the French baroque that its name appears to hint at.

'It's true that the Musiciens du Louvre has become quite chameleon-like, polyvalent,' says its founder, conductor Marc Minkowski. 'We've played Bizet's *Carmen*, we've played *Die Feen* by Richard Wagner, experiments which are all quite different, without ever forgetting our roots.'

Those roots were always quite diverse. Although a period instrument orchestra, it was not limited to one era or form in particular. Minkowski chose the name, he reveals, for no real reason other than he was living on the rue de Rivoli opposite the former royal palace at the time he was looking for a name for his new group (the orchestra relocated to Grenoble in 1996, enticed by regional subsidies). And he points out that the orchestra only began playing Bach three or four years ago, hinting at an organisation willing to follow its own path rather than stick to the better known landmarks.

Minkowski agrees this relative eclecticism may be a little unusual among period groups. 'Often orchestras divide into two, like the English Baroque Soloists and the Orchestra Romantique et Revolutionnaire, the Chapelle Royale, the Orchestre des Champs-Élysées. With us too, we keep the same name, the musicians change a bit but many of them are truly multi-skilled with two or three types of repertoire – baroque, classical, romantic and sometimes a fourth, modern. It's very important for me because I myself love to do different things and I need partners who have the same spirit.'

Like Bach, Schubert is relatively new to the orchestra, so Minkowski is quick to reject the suggestion that his forthcoming cycle for Naïve of symphonies represents the culmination of any kind of evolution of his view of the composer.

'No, not at all, we can't have changed

because it's completely new to us! It's more a continuation of our work on Haydn and the fact we began playing Beethoven's Ninth two years ago. It's a very classical approach but all the same very romantic, I hope, very warm and very melancholic since this music is very mysterious. And it's interesting to hear the sound of the orchestra as Schubert knew it, for the mix of timbres, the coming together of winds and strings that can sometimes seem a struggle.'

But it is an overview, all the same. 'For a string quartet, the best way to get into the mind of a composer is to play a cycle of his work. You understand his evolution, all his contrasts and changes. And I've always been very admiring of those cycles by pianists or quartets of Haydn, Mozart, Schubert. For orchestras, paradoxically, few people do complete cycles of Schubert in concert – rather Beethoven, more rarely Schubert. As with us, we began with Haydn, and it was such a pleasure. A marathon of long duration – you need several days to play four hours of music – but nevertheless when you're in the middle of it, it's a magical pleasure.'

The cycle was recorded live in Vienna, a city where Minkowski has worked frequently over the years, but it is in Salzburg that he is set to deepen his connections with Austria as he accepts the invitation to head the city's annual Mozart festival, the Mozartwoche. The January celebration is put together by the Mozarteum Foundation, an organisation tracing its origins as far back as Mozart's widow which runs various events and houses several collections. How has Minkowski deployed his new broom in such a venerable institution?

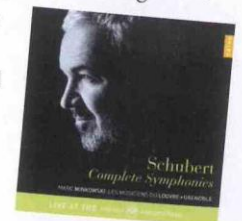
'There is a framework that is already well defined, a tradition that we didn't want to cut short because it's a tradition with a public who have followed it for a long time, with concerts from the Vienna Philharmonic, with big soloists, with chamber music and guest orchestras such as the Orchestra of St Martin in the Fields, among

others. But we wanted also to bring a personal touch, with composers in residence, for example, and by having a children's orchestra – after all, childhood for a composer like Mozart is absolutely fundamental. And then by trying to produce an opera, with somewhat reduced means and above all by trying to find co-producers to support us – this year it's the summer festival that is the co-producer of *Lucia Silla*. A great stroke of luck.'

Minkowski will be using his Musiciens du Louvre-Grenoble for the opera but the festival programme offers a highly international flavour with the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment among the period instrument groups. Does he see big differences in approach to period performance from different countries?

'It's difficult because we [in the Musiciens du Louvre] have a cocktail of nationalities. There are many who have settled in France and have acquired a style in common with us, but it remains a very international mix. Of course, you can compare it with the English orchestras who are generally much more polished than in France or in Germany, sometimes very effective but sometimes more anonymous too. Or the contrary, German orchestras which can be full of energy and accentuation but which from time to time have little warmth. But undeniably – I'm speaking to pay homage to England! – there's always an elegance, for instance in the work of John Eliot Gardiner, a refinement, whether in Rameau or Berlioz, that French orchestras haven't always managed to get across. And I've a lot of admiration for the work of Pinnock or Hogwood, even Mackerras when he was alive. So... *chapeaux!*' **CM**

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