

Q: You were recently appointed Principal Guest Conductor of the RTÉ (Ireland's public service broadcaster) National Symphony Orchestra. You also happen to be the first woman to hold that position. Tell us how that feels.

Nathalie Stutzmann: I was so happy when the proposal came from Dublin! It's nice, of course, to be the first, but what I really liked was that no one thought of speaking of me as a woman. It's actually an advantage to be a singer because I can sing the phrase to the orchestra to imitate exactly the instruments you would like to hear them play.

Q: Do you think that having to conduct Mahler and Wagner for your first concert as a guest conductor with the RTÉ NSO in February 2016 helped you develop a good working relationship right away with the musicians?

NS: What could be very important was the fact that Wagner demands very good technique. That shows off your ability to lead a large orchestra, and the structure is enormous, with long lines, 25-bar crescendos. Also, with German Romantics, the possibility of tonal colours is endless. The RTÉ NSO loves to be challenged – so much so that at my second rehearsal, I had to stop them because the service was over!

Q: Mahler's symphonies, with or without singers, are to some extent the operas that he never wrote. Is that why you relate well to them?

NS: I have sung much more Mahler than I have conducted. I am actually crazier about Brahms. But what I love about Mahler is that he's a composer of extremes. In one second, you go from hysterical joy to deepest drama, *ppppp* to *fffff*. I have to control the emotions because they are sometimes quite violent.

Q: At your concert with the RTÉ NSO on 13 January this year, there was Brahms' *Double Concerto* and *Second Symphony*. How is that repertory different?

NS: The main difficulty is the quality of sound, very round. I don't like this kind of skinny sound you hear from some conductors and orchestras, but it can also easily become too heavy. Brahms' symphonies are basically the reason why I wanted to become a conductor. They just go to the heart, the sound, the expression, the roundness. You get this instinctively, or not.

Q: Tell us how your conducting has benefited from your knowledge of Baroque opera, especially Handel, for instance in the album that you released at the head of Orfeo 55.

NS: Handel is the main repertory for an alto in Baroque opera, and I did a lot at the beginning. After doing Romantic music, I wanted to come back to Baroque, so I created my own orchestra to do that kind of music. Dynamics, phrasing: I always prepare all the orchestra material myself. This has been a wonderful school for conducting an orchestra. I'm very sensitive to the polyphony, it develops your ears. People like Ravel and Debussy were forced to study Monteverdi and Palestrina at the Villa Medici in Rome because that was the basis of how to compose and understand harmonies.

Q: Sir Simon Rattle says you are "the real thing" – quite a compliment. People often refer to the chemistry between you and orchestral musicians. Does that come from an operatic career and creating a group identity for a stage production?

NS: Now that's an interesting question, I never thought about that. I have a completely mad love for music, and I have the ability to share it. I'm always fresh and never bored or spoiled by the joy of conducting music. It's like a virus, and I try to spread it.

Q: What was it like with a very Anglo-Saxon work like Handel's *Messiah*, which you did for your debut with the Philadelphia Orchestra?

NS: I did it and was invited back less than 24 hours later. They said I brought a freshness to it. I know it by heart, and I worked for weeks on the orchestra material and prepared all the parts. When you do that, you make it yours. You can put your own ideas in much less rehearsal and more clearly.