



# I've missed birthdays, funerals...



Bryn Terfel, the world's most in-demand baritone, barely has a day off in the next five years. Which makes for a difficult home life, he tells Helena de Bertodano

**I** think to myself what a wonderful world," sings the Welsh bass-baritone Bryn Terfel, pitch perfect, holding the last note of the song until it is absorbed into the walls of the tabernacle in Salt Lake City, Utah, where he is recording with the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. There is complete silence afterwards, broken suddenly by Terfel speaking in his broad Welsh accent: "I think to myself – that take was GOOD." The 360-strong choir erupts with laughter.

It is a tribute to his easy-going personality that the four-hour evening recording session flies by. Terfel, one of the most sought-after opera singers in the world, has insisted that I sit up on the stage next to him so that I can be amid the world-renowned choir. "It's a sound you don't hear with any other choir," says Terfel, hugely enthused. "It's very mellow and mellifluous."

At every break, he talks to a few members of the choir or orchestra, laughter bursting out wherever he is. "I'd rather walk into a recording session with a smile on my face," he tells me later, "and talk with whoever I can in the choir. They remember my name, why shouldn't I remember theirs?" He has made several recordings in the last decade with this choir. "The musical welcome here is second to none," he says. En route back to Wales from a tour of Australia and New Zealand, he has stopped off to record a CD with a distinct Americana feel but with a link to Wales – reflecting the Welsh heritage of both the choir and Terfel.

It is nearly midnight by the time we all get back to the hotel but Terfel is on a roll and starts planning a get-together in the bar with some of the recording team. Thinking that he would prefer to do this without a journalist in tow, I say I will leave them to it. Terfel looks at me as though I am mad. "Why? You have to meet Sid."

Sid, it turns out, is his producer Sid McLauchlan. We meet him in the bar and Terfel orders a couple of bottles of red wine and gently teases the waiter. "Hello Dylan," he says, spotting his name tag. "That's a Welsh name, you know, like the poet Dylan Thomas." Dylan looks bemused.

Half an hour later, when the order still hasn't arrived, Terfel goes to the back of the empty bar. "Dylan," he bellows operatically. There is no response. Bringing over the glasses and setting them down himself, he comments drily: "Dylan's probably gone to look up who Dylan Thomas is."

Now aged 47 – and with a Grammy, a CBE and the Queen's



Medal for Music to his name – Terfel was first renowned for his Mozart roles, particularly Figaro and Don Giovanni. He is now more associated with the heavier Wagner roles, like Wotan. Far from an opera snob though, he is just as happy belting out ballads from Wales: he describes the deeply nostalgic *My Little Welsh Home* as "my *Roxanne*". He loves rock music and is sometimes compared – at least in America – to Meatloaf, whom he physically resembles. "Ha!" he says, amused at the comparison. "My wife loves Meatloaf."

Although he still refers to her as his wife, he has in fact recently separated from Lesley, his childhood sweetheart and the mother of his three sons. But he brings her into the conversation spontaneously – and always positively. "She can do nothing wrong in my eyes – my beautiful ex-wife." He pauses: "That's the first time I've referred to her like that. It sounds weird." Maybe they'll get back together? "No," he replies immediately. "But we were together over 30 years and I wouldn't change a thing. I would never be where I am if it wasn't for her. There were times I was away from birthdays, marriages, funerals." He even missed the births of two of his sons. "You can't have that back – but I made sure I was home when the third child was born."

When he put family first and withdrew from Covent Garden's Ring Cycle in 2007 because his youngest son needed an operation, he caused outrage in the opera world. "I would do it again," he says adamantly. "I knew that I would go back and sing the Ring Cycle in Covent Garden – and if they didn't want me I would go somewhere else." He sighs: "If one of your children is hurt, that's what you do. When people write negative things, you wonder if they understand the intricacies of family life. It wasn't just about him, it was about the other two [sons] and looking after them."

Born in 1965, the youngest son of a farmer (his older brother is a teacher), Terfel started singing in church and school. His career was launched when he won the Lieder Prize at the Cardiff Singer of the World competition in 1989.

From the outside, his rise seems effortless – but not to Terfel. “I progressed very slowly,” he says over breakfast the next morning. “After Cardiff, I did numerous auditions and out of maybe 35 auditions, I only landed two little jobs.” But one of the little jobs was as “the speaker” in *The Magic Flute*. “I sang that in Brussels in the Opera House and Gerard Mortier [the Belgian opera director] heard it and liked what he heard. So thanks to him I then sang in Salzburg for seven years doing really fantastic major roles,” – including his breakthrough role as Jochanaan in Strauss’s *Salome*.

He has sung to packed houses at most of the major opera venues in the world and since joining Deutsche Grammophon Records 20 years ago, has sold over 2.3 million albums. Earlier this year he signed a new long-term agreement with the label, which is releasing the album he is recording here in Salt Lake City. Yet he seems uncomfortable with his own success; whenever I refer to it, he closes me down. “You keep talking about success, I think you should get off that horse.” He pauses: “Am I wrong thinking like this? Maybe it’s the grounding I have in Wales that tells me: ‘No, don’t even contemplate it.’ I would never have thought myself to be in a position to sing Wagner.”

But now that he is singing Wagner, surely he must realise that he is successful. “How do you categorise success? Johnny Depp is successful – he’s an amazing actor. What is success? What is it? Do I sing at the Metropolitan Opera? Yes I do. Do I sing at Covent Garden? Yes I do.”

He laughs at himself, realising that he has answered his own question. “It feels so natural to do that though. Look,” he continues, “I can’t hide the fact that I make a good living out of it but I’ve worked my butt off for it.”

At first, he says, financial success was important to him. “It meant putting food on the table for my family.” Now he is more passionate about a foundation that he has set up to help other young singers. “There is nothing more positive than to be able to give money to an emerging young baritone; I would have given a right arm for money at a certain point during my student days where I was struggling to buy shoes.”

I ask what he would have done with his life if he had not discovered his singing talent. As a teenager, his father gave him jobs around the farm. Might he have become a farmer too? “No, I was terrible. I wouldn’t have had the ingenuity to build myself a reputation as a farmer.” His parents both sang – indeed Terfel says his father could have made it further than his son if his talents were channelled in the right direction. “If he’d been trained and caught at the right time, who’s to know?” As a teenager, he was nearly put off singing altogether.

“It was the *Billy Elliot* syndrome: I remember one Christmas concert, I was singing *Greensleeves* and we had these skinheads [at my school] who caught my eye and they had smirks on their faces. I had to leave the church because I got so nervous – it took me a couple of years to get over that fright. Singing at Covent Garden is easier.” At first, says Terfel, he was more drawn to popular music and as a young student at the Guildhall School of Music, he went to Pink Floyd concerts rather than opera. “Nothing would stop me from going to see rock bands. My initial introduction into opera was quite a significant one – *Otello* in Covent Garden with Placido Domingo. I saw it at a junction in my life when I was beginning to make decisions about my future and that performance ignited an incredible fire in me.”

At home or in the car, he rarely listens to opera – at least not when he is preparing a performance. “It could be a cross section from Nina Simone, Frank Sinatra, Tom Jones... anything that is far away from what’s churning in my head.” Music, he says, is always with him. “It’s a won-

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#### GOING SOLO

World renowned for his performances, including *Salome*, top left, Terfel also sings hymns and popular classics with the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, top right. The singer has now separated from wife Lesley, above

*Bryn Terfel’s new album, ‘Homeward Bound’, is released by Deutsche Grammophon on September 9*

derful ball and chain that you carry everywhere.” During the two days I spend with him, I notice that whenever he takes the lift alone and the doors close behind him, he waits a couple of seconds and then starts to sing. His voice is so powerful that even when he is several floors up, you can still hear him, drowning out the harpist in the hotel lobby.

Although relentlessly upbeat, the last year – as he confronts the break-up of his family – has obviously taken a toll on him. The family is still based in Bontnewydd, near Caernarfon, just a short distance from his own parents’ home, but Terfel has spent most of the last few months on tour. He describes how he gives everything of himself on stage “even going through what I’m going through now. You give everything inside you. I was close to tears yesterday on stage.” Why? “It’s just all the love around you. Everybody is so nice and supportive.” He looks close to tears again.

He says he thinks in Welsh “especially when I’m tired”, but wishes he had learnt another language when he was younger. “German would have been very helpful.” But, he



says, singing in another language and feeling the words is not so hard. “You could do it. I could give you a Russian song now and if I give you the right coaches, you could learn it in two days and be on a stage in Russia singing it.” Yeah, right, I say. “No seriously, it’s not difficult to sing opera. It’s harder to become a pop star than an opera star.”

A few days before we meet he says he received a phone call from Valery Gergiev, the Russian conductor and opera company director. “He asked me to come and sing [Scarpia] in *Tosca* at the Mariinsky – I’m thinking, ‘OK, Gergiev is ringing me and he’s asking me to go to Russia.’ It was at a time when I was meant to be at home with my boys, so I had to ask them and of course they will never turn around and say ‘We don’t want you to do that’ – so they said yes.”

It was a rare moment of spontaneity in the schedule of a man who is now so popular that he is booked solid for years in advance. I ask him where he sees himself in 20 years’ time. “Ha!” he says. “You already know that my calendar is mapped out for the next five years. Surely that’s enough.” On the immediate horizon, Terfel will be an “artist in residence” at the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra in September and afterwards will travel to California to sing *Falstaff* at the San Francisco Opera. Next spring he will sing *Faust* at the Royal Opera House. Many of these roles he has sung before but he says there are still musical stones unturned for him. “There’s a Schubert song cycle that I want to perform. And I’d love an opera – say *Citizen Kane* – to be written for me. Maybe a season in a West End theatre would be interesting, singing *Les Miserables* or *Sweeney Todd*. These are all wonderful singing opportunities.”

He loves experimenting with different genres and I ask if there is anything that he wouldn’t sing. “If somebody asked me to do an album of Elvis Presley songs, I wouldn’t go there.” Does he not like Elvis Presley? “I adore Elvis Presley,” he protests: “I just think that might be taking it a bit too far.”