

'If I am honest, I absolutely hate to speak'

Sublime tenor Andrea Bocelli, blind since the age of 12, tells *Helena de Bertodano* why he prefers to communicate through song

If Andrea Bocelli had his way, he would never speak, only sing. So it seems almost unfair to subject him to an interview. "If I am honest, I absolutely hate to speak. Singing is the only way I have to express myself fully," he says. "I feel art is a cryptic language, but once it is deciphered, it is a much more profound language than the spoken word. If you find yourself looking at the *Pietà* by Michelangelo, you feel an emotion that comes from a very strong communication that has absolutely nothing to do with language."

The analogy is poignant. Blinded at the age of 12, Bocelli cannot see any work of art – except in memory. But perhaps it is this memory of communication that has seen him succeed, becoming one of the most famous tenors in the world and selling more than 150 million records. Elizabeth Taylor famously said that his voice brought her out in "golden goosebumps" and Céline Dion, with whom he once sang a duet, said that "if God had a singing voice he would sound like Andrea Bocelli".

Bocelli is, nevertheless, a polarising figure among critics. Bernard Holland of *The New York Times* has written of "poor phrasing, uneven tone and lack of technique", while others are dismissive of his tendency to segue from classical to pop (his latest album, *Cinema*, is a compilation of songs from the movies, including *The Godfather*, *Gladiator* and *Doctor Zhivago*). He shrugs off such criticism, however.

"All the biggest tenors in the world, beginning with [Enrico] Caruso, have done it. Why should I not do it? I have many friends who don't love opera and I like to sing

songs for them also. It's beautiful to sing for everybody."

I mention that he is sometimes described as a bridge between classical and pop and he shakes his head. "No, I don't believe the bridge. I don't like crossover, this terrible word."

This might sound like an outburst, but Bocelli is genial company. We meet at a Los Angeles hotel, where he is staying following a sell-out concert at the Dolby Theater. The room is filled with aides and hangers-on. Bocelli stands out, an oasis of calm amid the hurly-burly around him. Dressed from head to toe in royal blue, including his shiny loafers, he looks younger than his 57 years. His eyes are shut behind his Ray-Bans, yet he moves easily across the room, an assistant's arm lightly at his elbow to help him avoid obstacles.

His childhood in rural Tuscany could not have been further from the world he has come to dominate.

"My parents used to sell agricultural machinery. My father absolutely hated the opera," he says. He throws back his head and roars with laughter: "He found it boring. For him it was an old thing for old people... Later he was very proud [of me]. But he always wanted to make sure I knew about the world, too. A singer who has no culture risks being an empty box."

Bocelli studied law and supported himself by singing at a piano bar in the evenings, and it was there that



he met his first wife, Enrica, with whom he has two sons, now 20 and nearly 18. (He also has a three-year-old daughter, Virginia, with second wife Veronica, who doubles as his manager.) In 1992, he got his big break when the Italian rock star Zucchero Fornaciari held auditions for tenors. Luciano Pavarotti heard Bocelli's tape and declared "there is no finer voice than Bocelli" – a remark that changed his life.

"Pavarotti loved me," says Bocelli. "He called me [to sing] at his wedding and his wife called me again for his funeral."

Yet Bocelli remains doubtful about his own abilities, and you can't help wondering if that is what drives him. "With time I was able to greatly improve my vocal technique. At the beginning I sang only with my nature. I had to learn a lot... Now, if my

'Pavarotti loved me,' says Andrea Bocelli (singing with Luciano Pavarotti in 2002, left). Bocelli with his first wife Enrica and son Amos in 1997, right

voice comes easily, it is like the water that comes out of a spring, that's when I have fun." I ask if it is easier because he is older. "No," he laughs. "It is just I had a disadvantage of not being that good."

The previous night, I had watched Bocelli being introduced on stage with Nicole Scherzinger, who was lead singer of the American pop group the Pussycat Dolls. I ask him whether he enjoys this juxtaposition between high and low culture, which has given fuel to his critics. He chuckles deeply. "Well, listen. I'm a man and I'm Italian. The concept is very clear." I am not quite sure what he thought I was asking there.

Bocelli is clearly a force of nature. As a child he was nicknamed The Earthquake by his family. "I was very, very lively. I was always looking for danger. I was always galloping horses without a saddle, I was crazy."

And this energy has not been deterred by what happened to him when he was 12. Born with limited

Arts

'I believe that all of us have huge disadvantages in life, mine is just more obvious than most'

vision due to glaucoma, his sight went completely when he was hit on the head by a soccer ball. He suffered a brain haemorrhage and doctors used leeches in a vain attempt to save his vision.

Later I speak to his friend, the producer Tony Renis, who describes Bocelli as breathtakingly adventurous: "He rides, he skis, he even surfs in the sea alone. It is unbelievable."

He has a stable of horses now at his home on the Versilia coast in Tuscany and rides them often, preferably at night. "It's more quiet at night, more peaceful and the horse is more happy. There are many beautiful paths between the fields."

For years, Bocelli has refused to discuss his blindness, and usually an edict goes out before interviews, banning any questions about his disability. He even used to walk out if the topic was raised. No one has warned me off today, so I test the water tentatively by asking if he agrees with the quote from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince* that "what is most essential in life is invisible to the eye". Bocelli smiles broadly. "I can only say I am somewhat in agreement with that."

He adds that his blindness is "a huge disadvantage. But at the same time I believe that all of us have huge disadvantages in life, mine is just more obvious than most."

Bocelli has never wasted time or energy bemoaning his blindness.

"I am a very religious man and I do believe that God has made this decision for me. I have the most important thing that a man can ask for in his life: the love of his family, his friends. I have money, I have success. Why should I ask for more? I am very, very lucky."

Cinema by Andrea Bocelli is released on October 23 on Decca



Putting Burt back on the jukebox

Musical

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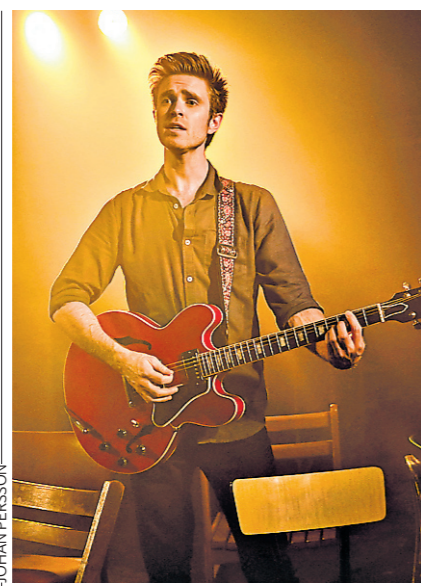
★★★★★

By Claire Allfree

Jukebox musicals can be the scourge of musical theatre. At their worst, they unthinkingly plonk an artist's back catalogue on stage, with a bit of narrative thrown in for good measure. Yet this straight musical retreat through the Burt Bacharach songbook shows how well the genre can work.

Kyle Riabko, an outrageously talented Canadian-American composer and performer, has taken 30 classic songs by Bacharach and his lyricist Hal David and, through some highly imaginative, tender new arrangements, stripped them right back to reveal the narrative of bruising melancholy at their core.

Originally seen in the UK at the Menier Chocolate Factory, and before that in New York, this is a show that makes a virtue of being as unshowy as possible. Decked in a Bohemian bric-a-



Kyle Riabko in a show that makes a virtue of being as unshowy as possible

brac of old sofas, lamps and suspended guitars, Christine Jones and Brett Banakis's set feels like a beatnik dive in Greenwich Village circa 1972. The seven performers, all beautiful young things, hang out on stage as though old friends meeting for a beer and a bit of a jam. The mood is laid-back, hippyish and very deliberately unglitzy.

The occasional wig out not withstanding, Riabko's covers rarely

aim for anything too radical. Rather, familiar songs such as *I Just Don't Know What to Do with Myself* or *Windows of the World* find a renewed emotional clarity by virtue of Riabko's aromatic, bluesy fretwork, folksy backing harmonies, and Anastacia McCleskey's smoky soul vocals.

Not everything on stage works. Director Steven Hoggett occasionally interjects a bit of narrative posturing. *Magic Moments* hardly needs the vocalist Stephanie McKeon looking sorrowfully at a letter to emphasise its subtext. And although Hoggett aims for the sort of revelatory intimacy he achieved with the musical *Once*, the results can feel manufactured. The second half opens with percussionist James Williams whipping up a jam that's mind-blowing, even if the set-up also has a whiff of the commodified cool you might find in a Pepsi advert.

Elsewhere, Riabko picks out repeating musical echoes across Bacharach's oeuvre. Strains from *Magic Moments* reverberate against the melody of *Trains and Boats and Planes*. *Walk On By*, *Raindrops Keep Falling On My Head* and *Close to You* blur into each other like some mysterious musical mirage or delirious Bacharach dreamscape.

Until Jan 10 2016. Tickets: 0844 847 1778; closetoyoulondon.com

The sound of an orchestra screaming

Classical

Penderecki/LPO
Royal Festival Hall

★★★★★

By Ivan Hewett

There's a kind of modern music which plumbs depths of terror and anguish, as the soundtrack to Hitchcock's *Psycho* proves. The Polish composer Krzysztof Penderecki plumbed those depths in 1961, when he composed *Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima*. It made him a poster-boy for modern music.

The piece has lost none of its power, as the London Philharmonic Orchestra proved. It was conducted by the composer himself, a bear of a man, with a fringe of white hair. With brutal chopping gestures, he launched the famous opening, where each section of

the large string orchestra "screams" at the top of its range. Other strange sounds followed; shivers, sad cries, creptations like far-off gunfire (Penderecki was seared by memories of Nazi occupation). Occasionally a dense mass of sound narrowed to a single note, like a picture coming into focus.

It was shattering, but when you've gone to the limit, where do you go next? Back to romanticism, was Penderecki's answer, as his other two pieces showed. His *Adagio* for strings at first recalled Shostakovich, with anguished violin melodies groping their way over a shifting bass. Soon the texture thickened, and memories of more romantic composers flitted across the music. It was hardly less dark than the *Threnody*, but Penderecki's music isn't always anguished, as the performance of his Horn Concerto proved. The beginning was rapturous, with three off-stage horns echoing the amazingly

expressive and agile soloist Radovan Vlatković. We were in a German romantic forest, the horn sometimes at the gallop, at others times slow and dreamy, or brisk and military, with an echo of Mahler's sarcasm.

It was fantastically fluent, very cunningly orchestrated, and here and there a genuinely entrancing moment emerged. But at bottom, the music seemed deeply flawed. Deep down, Penderecki hasn't changed at all. He still aims for maximum impact at every moment, with no sense of long-range design. For an eight-minute shocker like the *Threnody*, that's fine. For anything with pretensions to real musical subtlety, it's a disaster.

To end Penderecki conducted Shostakovich's Sixth Symphony. The tragic opening struck home, but the final movement was a long way from the rushing Presto the composer asked for. Even so the piece's masterly design put Penderecki's meandering effusions in the shade.



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