

# Maestro and commander

Exciting changes are afoot at English National Opera – and new musical director Mark Wigglesworth is boldly leading the way, discovers **Katie Law**

**M**ARK Wigglesworth has just finished rehearsals for Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, which opens the London Coliseum's new autumn season in a fortnight. It's been a long day for the 51-year-old conductor but he's bouncing with energy as he shows me around the set – a huge box lined with Persian carpets (digital not real) – that represents *Lady Macbeth's* interior world.

The first performance on September 26 formally marks the start of his musical directorship of English National Opera. It was a controversial appointment made during what has become a controversial period in the company's history. Top-level resignations, leaked letters about lavish spending on productions, substantial funding cuts and serious concerns raised about "ENO's governance and business model" made for a narrative worthy of its own tragic opera, but Wigglesworth has picked up the gauntlet with enthusiasm.

"With all the changes in management it's a thrilling time for the company. You could look at it and think 'How frightening, everything's different', but actually to have a completely fresh set of challenges is healthy," he says. "Inevitably, how these changes have been presented to the public appears much more abrupt than to anyone within the company. We don't feel beleaguered or in turmoil."

The biggest challenge is getting more people through the doors and onto the Coliseum's 2,300 seats every day, not

just when Mike Leigh directs *The Pirates of Penzance* or Emma Thompson stars in Sondheim's musical, *Sweeney Todd* (both of which outsold any other recent ENO production).

So how is Wigglesworth going to crunch the numbers? "We've got the best address for a theatre in London and it's such an amazing space. But it's a massive old building and we need to make it more accessible by opening the doors in the morning and offering an 18-hour-a-day experience, not just in the evenings. They're hard doors to open too, so it's a very symbolic gesture."

Benugo, the food outlet that operates in most of London's public art institutions, is largely funding the £1.2million refurbishment of the Coli's Edwardian foyer, which includes restoring the mosaic floors, relighting both inside and outdoors, and opening a café and wine bar in conjunction with architect Robin Snell and Partners. It should be finished by next summer.

A new pricing structure has been introduced too, with 500 tickets selling for £20 or less. "Ask anyone how much a ticket is and they don't know. Look, I don't judge somebody for spending £50 on a football match for an hour and a half, or twice that on a meal out – they are entitled to their choice. But the number of people who say opera is too expensive for them when it's not means that it's our responsibility to make it clearer, by going on about it. If you prefer football, fine, just don't complain about the price."

Upping the number of musicals is another obvious money-spinner about which Wigglesworth is realistically



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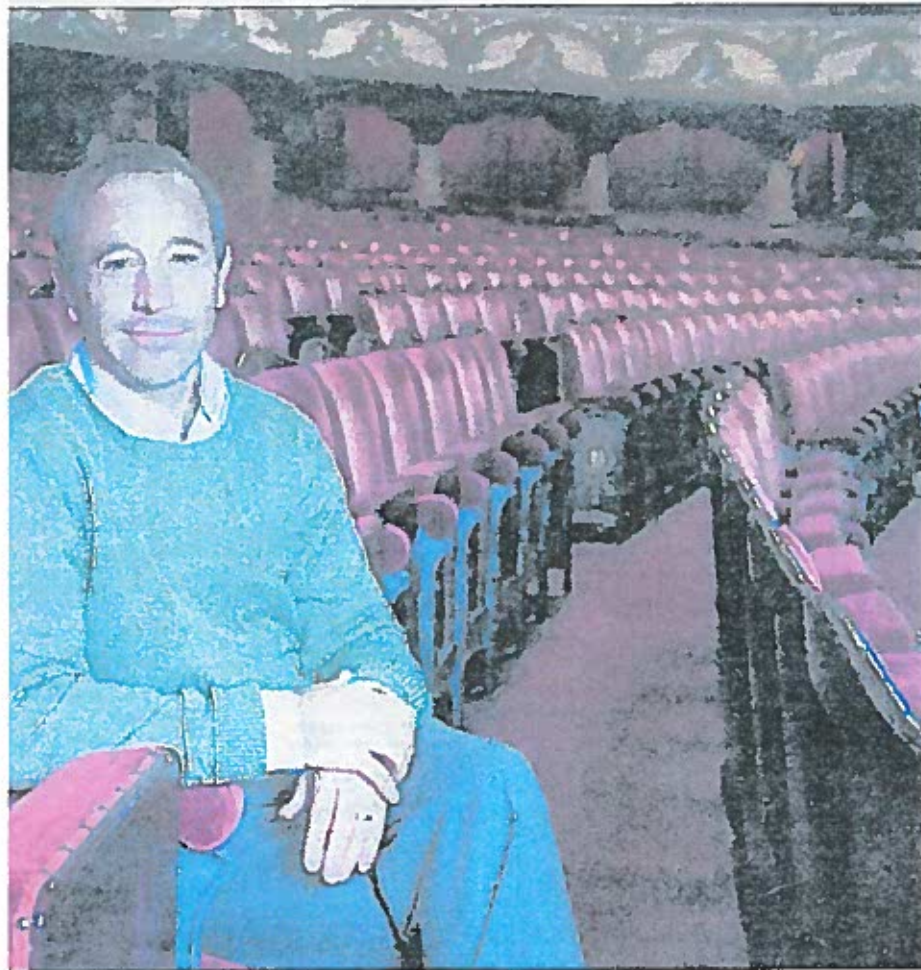
open-minded. "If the Royal Shakespeare Company can put on *Matilda* and the National can do *War Horse* I don't see a contradiction.

"In today's climate we have to be conscious of doing enough productions that look after our finances, although we'd never set out to do anything purely because of money."

The funding of classical music and its venues in London is a perennial hot topic and one on which Wigglesworth is well-versed. Does he agree with Sir Simon Rattle, for example, that the capital needs a new concert hall? "He's right, of course London would benefit. But with shrinking public subsidies for the arts it's important to consider where the money should best be spent, and at a time when musicians' jobs are being threatened and schools are spending less money on musical education, my personal view is that the money should go there."

Rumour has it that ENO's next big





**Baton charge:** left, Mark Wigglesworth in the auditorium at the Coliseum. Above, conducting

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'lead' and nowadays we're fortunate to live in a time where leading a company has to be done in a collaborative and empowering way, not like those dictatorial conductors of the Thirties. But in terms of demands I do know that the person I make the most demands on is myself."

Does he make himself cry? "Without wanting to sound too pretentious there's an aspect of never being satisfied with what you do yourself that's important and difficult," he replies.

As for his conducting style, "I try not to watch myself. You must never be self-conscious and think 'Oh, I probably look funny here or I need to look like this', because you'll lose your sincerity. Your body follows your feelings and thoughts rather than the other way around, which is why every conductor looks different because their body shapes are different – I'm short."

Wigglesworth says the physical demands of conducting are nothing compared to the aches and pains he feels sitting at home for long periods studying scores. He has a flat in London but lives near Beachy Head in Sussex with his wife Annemieke Milks, an expert in prehistoric spearhead technology, and their four-and-a-half-year-old daughter.

"I love being on my own in the countryside but I also find this huge diversity and quantity of people in London thrilling. It's absolutely our challenge now to get as many of them as we can through our doors."

■ *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* is at the Coliseum, WC2 (020 7845 9300, eno.org) from September 26 to October 20

buster will be Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical *Sunset Boulevard*, Glenn Close reprising her role as Irena Desmond next year. Later this year there'll be a talk with the Dalai Lama, the British Fashion Awards, the Tracker Christmas Gala and so on, to mention hardy perennials such as Adam Butterfly.

**N**EXT June sees an ambitious new production of *Tristan and Isolde* designed by Anish Kapoor; Wigglesworth rates Wagner as the greatest of composers. "Even though as a person he was a monster, the humanity of the voice that he expresses is what he voices the audience," he says. "I really love everything at once: music, drama, voice and the emotion of his telling," which is why understanding the story is crucial, hence the need for the English translation. He thinks the man who disagrees is being a snob.

"Most people expect to see Chekhov or Ibsen in English. They don't say 'Oh, I love the Russian and couldn't possibly see it in translation'."

But he dislikes the term "singing in English". "It sounds provincial; I prefer the term singing in the language of your audience because the vernacular changes every 10 years so you constantly have to re-do your translations. Anything from the Sixties sounds dated now."

Wigglesworth, who went to Bryanston School, Manchester University and the Royal Academy of Music – and has conducted opera companies and symphonies all over the world – agrees that his performances from even 15 years ago seem dated and cringes when he watches himself. "I look back and think I didn't have a clue. As you get older and more experienced you understand the piece from a deeper angle."

Has he become easier to work with? He has a reputation for being

determined, meticulous, hot-headed and difficult. "That's the image, isn't it! But what's interesting about those words? I mean, hot-headed – to be passionate – is fantastic and obviously you have to care more than anybody else because you are offering a vision for people to follow. What I'd say about the 'difficult' tag..." he pauses so long I can almost hear him thinking "...is that I hope I would never be rude to anybody. But I do think what we do is difficult."

Has he ever made anyone cry? "Oh, I hope not," he says and bursts out laughing. "I'd be horrified to think that. Conducting literally means 'with' and

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