

Bows and batons

Francesca Treadaway introduces Thomas Kemp, a musical multi-tasker swapping the violin for the podium

It's a beautiful sunny day in April when I settle down to call violinist-turned-conductor Thomas Kemp. I cannot help but feel slightly nervous – he has established himself as one of Britain's most versatile musicians, in demand nationally and internationally.

Born in 1971, Kemp read music at St Catharine's College, Cambridge before going on to study violin and chamber music at the Royal Northern College of Music, where he now teaches. Conducting, he remarks, became an interest as a matter of course. 'My background as a violinist has involved chamber music and orchestral leading,' he explains, 'and it seemed like a natural progression.'

In 2003, Kemp was 'very fortunate' to win a Swedish Academy Scholarship, which enabled him to study conducting at Stockholm's Royal Conservatory with Alan Gilbert (chief conductor of the New York Philharmonic), Paul Magi and Finnish conducting legend Jorma Panula – teacher of conducting greats such as Esa-Pekka Salonen, Susanna Mälkki and Sakari Oramo. Kemp was the only British musician to be accepted onto this particular course – and, in 2007, he graduated with distinction. 'It was tough juggling learning scores,

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preparing for conducting lessons, workshops and concerts and travelling,' Kemp recalls, 'and combining this with orchestral leading, chamber music, teaching at the RNCM and doing commercial sessions in London for film and TV. But it massively expanded my musical horizons.'

Upon completion of his studies, Kemp began working professionally as a conductor in the UK and Scandinavia. Then, in the late 1990s, he founded his own ensemble, Chamber Domaine, 'with the idea of having a flexible, elite chamber ensemble of colleagues that could expand for different projects that were concept- or repertoire-led'.

All Domaine releases to date have included world premiere recordings. Scheduled for release in September is a Kemp-conducted recording of world premiere works by Mark Anthony Turnage, which will include an arrangement of Turnage's

opera *Greek* alongside a career-spanning spectrum of the composer's output. As well as setting these firsts to disc, the group frequently performs UK and world premieres by leading composers – something Kemp feels is important in broadening audiences. 'If I were to record a complete set of Beethoven symphonies, there would have to be a good reason to do so; there are so many versions already. I like to record works that have not yet been recorded by anyone else. It contributes to a better understanding of music. It is important for artists to not stick to the usual things.'

Earlier this year, the ensemble released *Landscapes, Real and Imagined*, a disc of compositions by Judith Bingham featuring Korean soprano Yeree Suh, through Resonus Classics – the world's first entirely digital classical label. While this is an exciting prospect – the classical genre has been a little tardy in introducing such a label – does Kemp feel that it signals the end of CD-selling in shops?

'The general move is towards buying music online and downloading,' he responds. 'I can sell CDs at a concert, but to reach a worldwide audience it is easier to release downloads. The recording industry is constantly evolving. This change is not unusual.'

Kemp demonstrates that it is possible to build a wide-ranging musical career, and he dislikes being labelled as simply a 'performer' or 'conductor' – or, worse still, as having a 'portfolio career'.

'I can see this idea of "portfolio",' he admits, 'but I think when someone says to me, "you have a portfolio career" – as a conductor and violinist – I have to respond that I don't, because fundamentally I am a musician. The trouble with such a definition is that it tarnishes music as a profession; a doctor treats different illnesses and a barrister has different cases but nobody would dream of describing them as having a "portfolio career".'

But in the face of funding cuts, how are young musicians supposed to break into the industry? Kemp is keen to insist that, essentially, government decisions do not matter.

'Governments come and go,' he says. 'The music profession is always there. It is important for people to think independently of the policies. This is why I have always wanted to work abroad; to widen the net for opportunities. The most successful orchestras have not been created by the government but by the musicians themselves. It is inevitable that, for musicians in the UK, it will be difficult to get a foothold in the profession, but we live in a global marketplace and there is nothing stopping musicians getting opportunities abroad.'

As we conclude our conversation, it strikes me that Kemp, with his deep musical knowledge and infectious conscientiousness, may well be on his way to becoming one of our most inspiring musicians.

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