

Thomas Allen

BRITAIN'S PASSIONATE BARITONE

SIR THOMAS ALLEN, Commander of the British Empire and a Knight Bachelor, this year celebrates the 35th anniversary of his debut at the Royal Opera House in London and his 25th year at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York. Hong Kong gets its first chance to hear the celebrated British baritone this month in a special, one-off performance with the City Chamber Orchestra of Hong Kong. Just before stepping on stage to perform in Munich, Allen shared a little about his passion for opera, food, family and community with *Prestige Hong Kong*.

How did your career in singing begin?

I owe a great debt to my parents. It was my father who taught me to play the piano, and I always heard music at home, usually the popular songs of the day. I was given many opportunities in church choral singing at a very early age. My voice broke at the age of 12, and for many singers, it's an important stage in deciding whether you go on as a singer. Almost overnight, my voice turned to baritone. I continued to participate in school concerts and earned roles as a soloist. My physics master was a singer as well. As I got older, it was he who gave me singing lessons as a schoolboy.

Who has been the greatest influence on your singing career?

Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau has influenced many singers. As a young singer, I listened to him a lot. I would say he has had a big influence on my singing.

I see that you have been featured on *Aria & Pasta*, a TV show about opera singers. What do you generally eat before a performance?

I was contacted by the producer of the programme. She was a former singer and friend of mine, who I had worked with at the Welsh National Opera. I especially enjoyed the fact that the show featured Declan Allen, our family dog, a lurcher greyhound. After a great performance, I always try to remember what I did before the performance, or what I ate, and then attempt to replicate the conditions again for the next performance. Before I perform, I like to eat steak, chicken or fish, and appreciate pasta and a good salad. Generally tomatoes are to be avoided as they are very acidic and creamy; dairy and spicy foods are also to be avoided before singing.

You were knighted in 1999. What was it like meeting the Queen? Does she have any favourite pieces?

Meeting the Queen was a very uplifting

experience, and I was honoured to meet her in such circumstances. It's a day when several hundred individuals go to the palace to be honoured. For some people, it's the biggest day of their lives. I spend a lot of time in very grand venues, and being knighted at the palace is certainly a special celebration. One thing that the British do very well is in the organization of those kinds of special events. Everything on the day is like clockwork, and it's all very impressive. I am told that one of the Queen's favourite pieces of music is Handel's *Zadok the Priest*, which was sung at her coronation.

Your repertoire is extraordinarily wide-ranging, from British folk songs to lieder and opera. What do you enjoy singing the most?

The music of Mozart is especially close to my heart, and I feel particularly at home in his cultural world. At one point in my career, I sang only opera, and I missed lieder. Now I think it is essential, and healthy, to have a mix of opera and lieder.

I know you are president of the British Youth Opera. Do you have any thoughts on the major challenges young opera singers face today?

I think it is very difficult for them to be able to say 'no' when offered roles that are not suitable for them. It is hard for them to resist temptation in this way. It is difficult for them to avoid doing too much, too soon. The British Youth Opera is a seasonal summer programme, and it serves the purpose of providing a channel for advanced students; more opportunities to be heard. It is for students at the beginning of their careers in music. I've been visiting Asia with Covent Garden and the Metropolitan Opera since 1979. Specifically, I've been coming to Japan and Korea. I remember that the Korean students used to greet me and present small gifts after my performances. Now, I sometimes meet those same people, almost 30 years later, in France, Germany and other European countries, and they have become professional singers and musicians. It's wonderful to know that I have helped to inspire some of the youth, not just in Europe and America, but Asia as well.

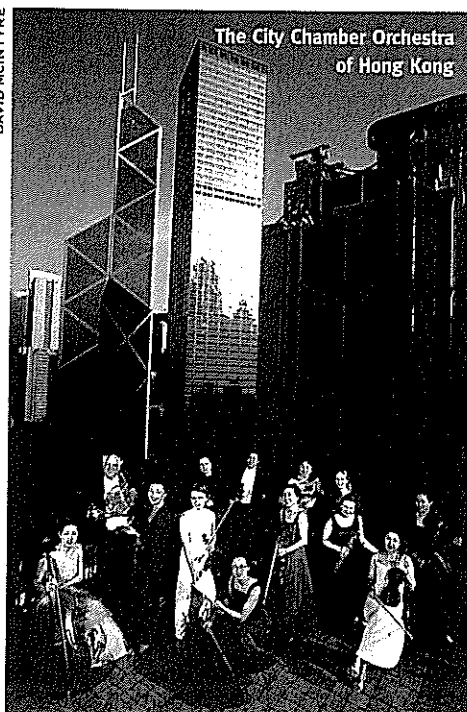
Can you tell us about your family?

There are great sacrifices that have come with my career, as I travel a great deal. Though my wife Jeanne often travels with me, I also have a son, two stepchildren and six grandchildren. It's hard keeping up to date on what everyone is doing, but we try our best to keep in communication.

You've been singing a lot for charitable causes recently.

Yes, I do sing to raise money for different charities. I've been involved with Cancer Research in Britain for eight years now, and this past year I've become president of Music in Hospitals, which focuses on the curative effects of music on people who are ill. It's very tempting to do as much work as possible by performing for more charities, but it's also important to maintain limited appearances for my singing. I'm very fortunate to have the career that I have, and so I do what I can to contribute back to youth and medical causes, which I feel are important. This year, it's Mozart's 250th anniversary, and tonight, I'm singing in *Così Fan Tutti* in Munich, Germany. After decades as a musician, I still enjoy that feeling of anticipation that one gets just before a performance. ■

Thomas Allen makes his Hong Kong debut March 9, performing with the City Chamber Orchestra of Hong Kong at the City Hall Concert Hall. For ticketing enquiries, visit www.urbtix.hk or www.ccohk.com



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