

*** Photos to be added soon**

Dieting Thomas is still hungry for success

As the 27th International East Anglian Summer Music Festival gets underway, its artistic director Thomas McIntosh reflects on an unusual year. LYNNE MORTIMER reports.

IF I had been writing about Summer Music 2005, last year, or the year before that or indeed virtually any year before that, I would have been describing Thomas McIntosh in much the same way.

The pianist and conductor, now in his mid-60s, was bespectacled, wore the classical music white tie and tails to perform and was just a little – and I hope he'll forgive me for saying so – paunchy.

What a difference a year makes.

I am enthusiastically greeted by a new Thomas McIntosh, who is slimmer, without specs and very relaxed.

What happened?

For a start: "I have lost over two stone. I'm exactly 12 stone now."

Does he have more energy? "My goodness – more energy and more mobility!" he exclaims. "I don't have to bend down over my stomach," he laughs.

Not only has this virtuoso pianist and conductor reinvented himself, he has also seen an upturn in his international career. A guest conductor in Japan, he has this year premiered his own variations on Japanese folk songs – a rare foray into composing but he liked it so much he wants to do more.

Coming up in the next few months is a gig in Siberia, when he will be conducting Bruckner's 4th Symphony, and a trip to Tennessee, where he and his wife, Ipswich lawyer Miranda Reckitt, will be looking at the possibility of organising a classical music festival.

Thomas, born in the state of Washington, USA, lives at The Old School, Hadleigh, in Suffolk, where he is the envy of every starstruck kid who ever wanted to put on a show because he has his own concert hall. The school building, with its gallery and dedicated performance space, is home to an annual programme of concerts – at Christmas, Easter and the longer summer season of music.

Throughout July, Summer Music 2005 serves up good music and good food, variously offering evening supper, afternoon cream teas, morning coffee and cake and ploughmans' lunches with the concerts.

Soloists for the season include some of The Old School favourites such as violinist Andrew Phillips, cellist Claire Constable, pianist Holger Aston and baritone Peter Grevatt.

Among the Summer Music debut artists for 2005 are Czech mezzo-soprano Edita Randova and Japanese pianist Eri Higashide.

Thomas himself will conduct and play although, this year, he is possibly more nervous about not playing. "This is the first time in my life I will sit and listen to someone play my music," he explains, as his own compositions are given their British premiere.

Among the best-known pieces in the programme are Chopin's *Andante spianato e grande polonaise*, Mozart's *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* and arias from Bizet's *Carmen*. The programme also includes lesser-performed music such as

Schoenberg's *Ode to Napoleon* but pride of place has to go to the French emperor's Nemesis at the Battle of Trafalgar, Nelson.

On Wednesday, 27 July, The Old School presents *Homage to Nelson – Immortal Memory* with an evening of music and narration, devised by mezzo-soprano Judith Buckle and narrator Peter Grevatt, to mark the 200th anniversary of Trafalgar.

While there is more music, there is a little less of Thomas McIntosh. His diet, much like the current GI thing, is a low to no-fat regime named the South Beach diet. One day there'll be a diet that allows its adherents to eat bread, butter and cheese, but this isn't it. No sugar, no starch no carbohydrates. Thomas says: "I haven't had a piece of bread since September 2004, nor pasta, potatoes or white rice.

"I eat enormous quantities of vegetables – which I always liked in any case. I have bacon and egg for breakfast and I'm obsessed by the blueberry craze." Apparently this popular fruit is chock full of Omega anti-cancer agents and it has made Thomas very happy. "I'm an American and we've always had blueberries," he says, gratified that we have now discovered them on this side of the pond.

"I have them every morning over non-fat yoghurt ."

It helps that there are only non-fat foods around the house. Miranda too has a strict eating regime. But beware of the cost, he warns.

"People tell you that you can eat more cheaply (on these diets) but it is not true," he says with heavy emphasis.

But it's worth it because he feels "a helluva sight better... but I am always hungry.

"Miranda says another year and it won't be so bad," and I could swear Thomas looked hungrily at the furniture.

He resolutely looks away. To be a professional musician demands enormous self-discipline and more than five decades of dedication have paid off now he's watching his weight. It gets him through the pangs of hunger.

"The other thing is alcohol. I have had none for five or six years. I drink gallons of sparkling water – Pellegrini and Perrier."

Can he tell the difference? Oh yes. "Perrier has a much dryer taste."

The slimmer model Thomas McIntosh now wears contact lenses.

"I am very shortsighted and had been wearing glasses since I was about 10-years-old. I could never get used to the old kind of contacts. I tried them when I was a student at Juilliard (America's most famous music academy)

"Living in New York, with those ferocious winds, a gust used to take the contact lens out of your eye."

Now he wears the silicon, one-month lenses. One lens corrects his short sight and the other, his long sight.

Along with the new man, comes the new look and this has been completed with the help of Ipswich bespoke tailor Richard Grimes of The Designer Rooms

"I got tired of wearing old-fashioned clothes – that sort of old fogey look.

Once in a while, some musician comes out in their own style and it helps affirm the impact of that person in the public's eye.

He mentions pianist and conductor Vladimir Ashkenazy and composer and conductor Andre Previn as two men who have brought their own style to the podium. "For (Sir Thomas) Beecham it was his buttonhole," says Thomas.

Thomas had a shirt with a raised collar that he loved to wear and, with the expertise of Richard Grimes, a heavier, more jacket-like version was created. Not only more comfortable than the former regulation tails “It hangs straight out of the suitcase,” Thomas says.

“Sometimes I have to live out of a suitcase. I can have five concerts in 10 days.”

He has been pleased by the response to his new gear. “In Japan, they went crazy for them. There was a young woman feeling the material – it’s a Turkish cotton.”

Thomas also swims and does about 25 minutes of exercise each morning.

“Things (joints) will creak. You’re keeping ageing at bay. There ain’t no Dorian Gray,” he accepts cheerfully.

“I think what I’ve done is taking on the business of middle age going on longer than it used to. It’s about making the body a better product, because if I keep healthier, I will make better music. I have been on a high, these last two years.

“My piano playing is better. I know that because I get asked back and that’s one of the important things for an artist. It’s what an agent wants to know – the percentage of times you get re-engaged and I have improved my tally enormously,” says Thomas with candour.

Among those engagements is conducting Bruckner’s 4th symphony in Siberia. To be accurate, in the big city of Krasnoyarsk, in eastern Siberia.

He has also been composing, taking his inspiration from the indigenous music of the Far East, scoring it for traditional orchestral instruments.

“Like China and India, Japan has a huge core of folk music but, unlike China and India, the native folk music has been put aside because they have adopted Western music.

“Japanese people know the folk songs but it’s not the sort of thing they go out and buy. I managed to get a couple of collections of the music.”

The notation is the same but the words, of course, were in Japanese but this didn’t present too much of a problem. “I can write and read Japanese and speak the language slowly,” says Thomas but, in fact, “I got someone to translate them for me.”

“I did the full score and all the parts. I was still sitting in the hotel room doing it the night before the first rehearsal.”

Thomas is proud of the result and doesn’t discount more composition work.

“It would be fun if someone commissioned a symphony.”

Summer Music 2005 is at the Old School, Hadleigh, until 31 July. Booking and information on Tel: 01473 822596; fax: 01473 824175; email

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