

DAME EVELYN GLENNIE

A SCOTTISH PHENOMENON

By Ken McNaughton

On Thursday 10 June 2010 the front of the stage in the Concert Hall at the Kennedy Center in Washington D.C. was entirely taken up with percussion instruments in three nests. The left hand group included a vibraphone, a large elevated bass drum, a large brass gong, cymbals, a silver tree spiral and wind chimes. The next group included a conventional drum set surrounded by numerous other gadgets. A little space was allowed center front for the podium of the symphony orchestra's conductor. On the right was a marimba surrounded by all sorts of percussive hardware and flanked with a pair of conga drums. The black-clad ladies and gentlemen of the National Symphony Orchestra had to find a place on stage behind all this.



The reason was so Evelyn Glennie could play Symphony No. 4, “Magma,” by Erkki-Sven Tüür, an Estonian composer. Glennie had approached him about writing a percussion concerto, but he instead produced a 37-minute symphonic treatment that premiered in Antwerp in 2002. Glennie strode on to the stage from the left, a slim athletic figure in a black pant suit and sheer black stockinged feet. Her black top covered her left shoulder and arm, while her right shoulder and arm were bare. A nine-inch shiny leather cummerbund completed the outfit. Her grey-and-white streaked hair hung straight down at breast length. When she got to work on the bass drum she looked like a Celtic princess. To get from Setup One to Setup Two, she picked up a silver cowbell and beat it in time as she walked around. To help her move to Setup Three, a hand-held set of silver chimes fulfilled the same function.

The program at the Kennedy Center was part of the International VSA Festival for the Arts and Disability, a festival that includes 2,000 participants from all around the globe. Before the concert, I listened to a group of blind students from Brazil called *Forró No Escuro* entertain the lobby crowd with a free concert. Evelyn Glennie fits into this celebration because she is hearing-impaired. She was born and grew up on a farm in Aberdeenshire and is the first person in musical history to successfully create and sustain a full-time career as a solo percussionist. Evelyn gives more than 100 performances a year worldwide, has commissioned 160 new works for solo percussion and composes and records music for film and television. She wrote a best-selling autobiography, *Good Vibrations*, and collaborated on the film *Touch the Sound* [1]. She was awarded the Order of the British Empire in 1993 and this was extended to Dame Commander in the New Year's Honours of 2007 [2].

In 1994 Glennie married composer, sound engineer and tuba player Greg Malcangi. They divorced in 2003 following her widely publicized affair with orchestral conductor Leonard Slatkin. In 1968, Walter Susskind named Slatkin assistant conductor of the Saint Louis

Symphony Orchestra and in 1979 he was named music director. He remained there until 1996 when he became music director of the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington, D.C. In 2000, he became the chief conductor of the BBC Symphony Orchestra. The thrice-married Slatkin had an affair with Glennie, the percussionist, who was twenty years his junior, but this was over by 2003 [3, 4].

It is so interesting to know that Evelyn Glennie is Scottish and is a remarkable percussionist. But the fact that she has a hearing impairment and had an affair with a world-famous orchestral conductor adds a lot of color and spice. And so I found myself in the second front row of the Kennedy Concert Hall, almost able to touch the stage, watching this remarkable woman. The program announced she would be available after the concert for a question-and-answer session. What would the audience ask her, and what would she say? It was obvious that people in the hall would be impressed with her amazing percussive talent. But was it even more amazing that she had a hearing impairment? Would anyone dare to ask her about that? Thousands of people would also know that she had an affair with Leonard Slatkin—who used to be resident conductor of the orchestra on stage. No one would ask her about that. What would happen when thousands of people were thinking these things during the concert, and the thoughts were hanging in the air?

The Q&A session was moderated by the Kennedy Center Director of Artistic Planning, Nigel Boon. He started asking the artists about the things he wanted to dominate the discussion—the music. That worked for a while, but sooner or later, it has to be turned over to the audience and the moderator hopes they will ask the sort of questions he wants to hear. But I know a bit about crowd dynamics and that was not what was happening. There was one microphone in each of the two aisles. A few hundred people had clustered at the front of the hall. But no one came to the microphones. There was an uneasy silence. I wanted to ask Evelyn Glennie a question, but didn't know how to do it. And I guessed that a lot of other people felt the same way. If we couldn't clear the air, this could be a disaster.

I got up, walked to the nearby microphone and the moderator gratefully invited me to speak. I said: “Dame Glennie, I have not yet read your autobiography but I hope to rectify that shortly. I understand you have a hearing disability and I wonder if you could tell us something about that, specifically how it happened and whether or not you have investigated any technical fixes.” She said, “Well I don't want to go into any details, because that is personal. I became profoundly deaf after contracting mumps at the age of eight.” She then went on to describe some of the techniques she developed to overcome this disability and indicated that she felt any technical fix might impair her power to use her learned workarounds. It was a very effective answer and feeling deeply grateful, I said “Thank you so much.” However, I was not prepared for what happened next. The entire audience broke into a spontaneous burst of applause. The tension had been broken. Other people got up and approached the microphones. Later on, one of the questioners told me she thought my question was excellent.

Next day I went to Evelyn Glennie's Website and read two of her essays, on “Hearing” and “Disability.” It was so helpful. I learned a lot about hearing and about how she views such impairments. I think she wanted to educate me about music, but once you place yourself in the stream of Celebrity, you have to accept the strengths and weaknesses of the system. She needed me to go to her concert. I wanted her to satisfy my curiosity about her life.

REFERENCES

1. <http://www.evelyn.co.uk/>
2. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evelyn_Glennie
3. <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/article481404.ece>
4. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leonard_Slatkin

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