

A Passage to India

British cellist James Barralet
is bridging the cultural divide

BY ANDREW PALMER

You can forget about English reserve in general. It exists, but it's usually superficial. And yet, there's cellist James Barralet. On the phone from Basel, Switzerland, he's quiet and thoughtful—as he is in person when we meet in London a week later. On the verge of a major career, the 28 year old expects to keep the UK as his professional base, and, for now, home remains a Warwickshire vicarage in "Shakespeare country."

The typical young English musician?

Well, no—first, because of the Swiss connection. That country's become his second home. During his advanced studies at Basel's Hochschule für Musik (assisted by the 2003 Royal Philharmonic Society's Julius Isserlis scholarship), he founded the contemporary music group *innov'ensemble*, with which he continues to perform—and he has a girlfriend there.

Second, when talking about music, he repeatedly uses such words as "lifeblood" and "energy," revealing a passionate intensity behind the shy exterior. It's an endearing combination, and one that surely contributed to his victory shared with Ilona Timchenko in the prestigious 2007 Landor Records Competition. Part of the prize is to have his debut CD of solo cello music recorded by Landor, whose management has a refreshingly open attitude toward repertoire.

"Competitors submit their own CD program," Barralet explains, "and the judges decide whether it'll make an attractive disc. I'll be recording the Kodály Sonata, the Britten Third Suite, and Partita by Edwin Roxburgh."

But it's not only with European music that he's making waves. Before going to the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester, where he won the Sir John Barbirolli Cello Prize, Barralet spent six months as a volunteer teacher at the Mathieson Music School in Calcutta, India, helping with lessons and conducting the school orchestra. It was a life-changing experience, particularly when he was introduced to the popular Indian percussion instrument: the tabla.

"I fell in love with it," he says, "and went to Varanasi, the center of music in Northern India, for three weeks intensive tuition. I took lessons every day, and played the tabla until my hands bled! Later, when I came to Basel, I discovered the Ali Akbar School of Indian Music here and was able to continue learning."

He's since formed a duo with the tabla player Sankar Chowdhury and has planned concerts and workshops in both England and India that combine music and poetry from East and West. It's an unlikely project, I suggest, for an English player of that most "classical" of instruments, the cello.

"I'm fascinated by different cultures," he replies. "For example, I love folk music, particularly Hungarian. There are clubs in Hungary where musicians meet and play every week—it's a living culture—and the music's so energetic and raw. For the same reason, what immedi-



ON THE VERGE: James Barralet.

ately appealed to me about Indian music was that I was able to completely lose myself in it. Playing it is a form of meditation, really—it's food for the spirit. The spontaneity of improvisation demands that you're absolutely in the 'now,' which is a very rewarding place to be!

"Of course, when you're performing Western music you're ideally also in the 'now' and living the character of the piece. But Indian music is different because of the way it explores the relationships between the tonic and other notes. It also involves a very wide range of rhythmic patterns."

So is there something about the cello that makes it particularly suitable for this kind of cross-cultural expression? Would Barralet be so captivated if he were, say, a clarinetist? "The violin's already an

accepted instrument in Indian music," he says, "and I'd say that the cello, with its earthy tone and possibilities for infinite ornaments and slides, is perfectly suited to it. You play shifts and ornaments that you wouldn't play in Western music, but the basis is the same: it's communication from the performer to the audience, from heart to heart. Your voice is your voice, and you just put on different accents, as it were."

"I also do free improvisation on the cello, and this helps my spontaneity when interpreting Western music. Having a broad spectrum of interests is always beneficial—for example, my interest in Hungarian folk music helps me to see where the Kodály Sonata's coming from."

Intriguingly, he wonders aloud whether the extreme discipline demanded by his favourite hobby—mountaineering—also influences his performances. "Lose your focus and make a mistake up there, and you could die," he muses, "so it's probably excellent training for improving concentration onstage!" □

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