



# Ambassador's Activities

2012

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Speech by *HE* Bernard Emié,  
French Ambassador to the United Kingdom

following a concert  
by the Royal Scottish National Orchestra  
conducted by Stéphane Denève

Edinburgh, 11 May 2012

*Cher Stéphane,*

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to pay my third visit to Scotland for this farewell concert.

First of all, my warmest congratulations on this superb present, which makes you now a fully-fledged citizen of Scotland. I am sure you will wear it proudly on stage, when conducting – most probably to the utmost delight of Åsa. Didn't you tell me it was one of her fantasies? Now, don't ask me why...

For the second time in a few months now, *cher Stéphane*, I've had the great privilege of listening to a concert you have conducted.

Both times, it's been magnificent. Both times, I've been deeply moved, because it's music I love. Last time, in September, it was to mark this year's 150th anniversary of the birth of Claude Debussy, one of my favourite composers, with "La Mer". This time, Ravel, just as romantic and subtle. Some say "impressionistic".

Both times have had a flavour of your second love: Scotland. Last time, the concert started with the bagpipes of the "Marche écossaise", which seemed to bring the fresh "haar" of the lochs to the braes of the Usher Hall... Tonight, "Britannia" – who rules the waves as everyone knows – by the Scot, MacMillan.

Quite a "bold Alliance"...

And superbly conducted.

*Cher Stéphane,*

Nobody needs reminding of your skills as an outstanding, charismatic young conductor, least of all your friends gathered here.

Music was in your veins ever since you were born in Tourcoing (northern France), like the composer Albert Roussel. At the age of eight, you began to study music theory and the trumpet. On your 14th birthday, you made your conducting debut with the Conservatoire de Tourcoing's student orchestra. You directed your first orchestra (the Orchestre des Jeunes du Nord) when you were only 22! Then you went to study at the Conservatoire de Paris, where you missed no opportunity to listen to concerts: on Wednesdays the Orchestre de Paris, on Thursdays the Orchestre National de France, and the Paris Opera or the Châtelet almost every other day of the week! It's no surprise that you graduated in 1995 winning a unanimous first prize, and were immediately hired by the Orchestre National de Lille.

Immediately after this, you went on to work with the greatest: as conducting assistant to Sir Georg Solti with the Orchestre de Paris, with Georges Prêtre at the Opéra National de Paris, and Seiji Ozawa at the Saito Kinen Festival Matsumoto in 1998.

You then made your conducting debut in the United States at Santa Fe Opera in 1999 with Poulenc's "Dialogues des carmélites", and worked with many other of the world's major orchestras as well.

This was followed by a constant string of successes:

You arrived in Scotland in 2005.

You first struck everyone as being the quintessential conductor. You have all the qualities required for being the perfect conductor:

- High visibility, thanks to your imposing stature and distinctive hairstyle, not to be compared with Boris Johnson's in London!
- You're the embodiment of the music you conduct: flamboyant and passionate... sometimes to the dismay of your musicians, who – I'm told – have had to meet your unforgiving standards!

In short, a perfect cast for a conductor in a thrilling Hollywood film: is this the skill you acquired in California, where you lived before coming here?

As a conductor, you've achieved what was called "a classical music revolution" in Scotland: among other things, you've given the RSNO's audiences Mozart, Wagner, Prokofiev, Dvořák and Strauss, whom we've celebrated tonight, and helped them discover a whole broad French repertoire.

Not forgetting MacMillan, of course, a Scottish glory.

You've engaged with the public throughout Scotland, participated in all aspects of the orchestra's life, conducting children's concerts in small venues across the nation's towns and villages, recording sessions, rush-hour concerts, free lunchtime events, chamber concerts, new audience development projects and much more. A typical week for you and the musicians might include a midweek concert in the north of the country (Aberdeen, Dundee or Inverness), a Friday evening at the Usher Hall in Edinburgh, and a Saturday evening performance at the Glasgow Royal Concert Hall.

Since your arrival at the helm of the RSNO, audience numbers have grown to historic levels and the number of subscriptions has gone through the roof.

And Scotland seems to mean a lot to you: this is where you've settled with Åsa, where your daughter Alma was born four years ago and where you've set up your first home as a family.

No wonder you have so many friends and this concert has been so emotional.

*Cher Stéphane,*

You are considered a national treasure here in Scotland! Is this why the Scots are determined to hold on to Åsa and Alma, to make sure you will be back as often as possible?

So you have become a Scottish treasure. And yet you are still French.

As everyone will know, under the Auld Alliance all French citizens were automatically Scottish too and vice-versa. You are now both. Quite rightly so.

I am told that your time at the RSNO, *cher* Stéphane, will also be remembered for the revival of French romantic and “impressionistic” music in the orchestra’s core repertoire: from the moment you arrived in Scotland, you were keen to showcase French music in your programmes: the RSNO has played much more music by Hector Berlioz, César Franck, Gabriel Fauré and, last but by no means least, Maurice Ravel, whose “Daphnis et Chloé” was memorably performed tonight, and this will stay with me for a long time to come. You have also championed lesser known composers such as Albert Roussel and Guillaume Connesson.

For your final season with the RSNO you chose to celebrate the works of Claude Debussy, to mark the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth.

Being French... you were perhaps expected to be talkative and have a latin passion for communication. And indeed all your concerts – like tonight’s – have begun with you enthusiastically presenting the pieces to be performed, and I gather this has played no small part in making you so popular.

*Cher* Stéphane,

After seven years of extraordinary success directing the RSNO – with the help of all its great musicians and singers, to whom I also want to pay a warm and well deserved tribute – you have achieved magnificent results.

With you, the RSNO has attracted unprecedented audience numbers, toured around Europe, receiving standing ovations at the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, Vienna’s Konzerthaus, Munich’s Philharmonie, the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées and the BBC Proms in London.

For your twin loves of Scotland and French music, Stéphane, you have become a truly great ambassador for the Auld Alliance, and surely a serious competitor for me in Scotland!

Bravo!