

Portillo and the



TANYA REED DISCOVERS THE MUSICAL ROOTS OF THE TORY STALWART AND CHAIRMAN OF SINFONIA 21, IMPERIAL'S ENSEMBLE-IN-RESIDENCE. HIS PRESENTATION 'IS BUSINESS RESPONSIBLE?' AT LEIGHTON HOUSE MUSEUM IN MAY, WAS WELL RECEIVED BY ALUMNI FROM AROUND THE WORLD.

AS CHAIRMAN OF SINFONIA 21, MICHAEL PORTILLO HAS THE chance to take the reins of a world-acclaimed orchestra. The previous chairman, Lord Dennis Stevenson, wanted to move on; was Michael interested? He answered yes. He wanted a challenge and the remit fell within his constituency. He also liked the idea of an orchestra at the frontiers of science and music; one committed to performing works of living composers.

"Music is hugely important. But sometimes I do no justice to it, when I rush to a concert at the end of a busy day, and don't take in the first half, as my mind is still full of other things.

"So many good things have come out of Sinfonia 21 — the potential to use music in the treatment of dementia; and the creation of Muzantiks, a website which enables young music students to compose and orchestrate works on line— I'd have loved that opportunity as a child."

For Michael Portillo, politics and music are unmistakably linked. The MP for Kensington and Chelsea decided to travel to Germany to present a BBC2 programme about Richard Wagner in the series 'Art that shook the world.'

His focus was Wagner's Ring cycle, which he claims is arguably the greatest study in opera of how political power corrupts (in the case of the god Wotan) and absolute power corrupts absolutely (in

the case of the dwarf Alberich).

"When you're busy in politics, opera gives you the chance to empty your mind and fill it up with something else," he explains.

"Filling it with the drama of Wagner's life and the politics of the Ring cycle is very interesting. It's demanding and satisfying and enables you to enter a different world."

If the former Shadow Chancellor's world had been different and a career in politics hadn't appealed, a career in music undoubtedly would. His passion for the classics started young; he grew up in a house where Brahms and Beethoven were always on the record player. His mother's family was fairly musical; she played piano along with his great aunt while another aunt played violin. The son of a Spanish academic and republican, Michael also learned to love the music of Sibelius.

"My own attempts were a failure. I was never able to master reading music and I was one of those kids who liked to do things they're good at. Older boys and university students began to educate me a bit in musical taste, leading me into more difficult things. I remain disappointed that I have no expertise, no understanding of theory. It's a project I can set myself now I have more time."

politics of music

Time is an entirely new concept for Michael Portillo — his CV is testament to this. After attending Harrow County GS where he first met his wife to be, Carolyn, a head hunter, he gained a first class degree in history at Cambridge while showing an entrepreneurial spirit during vacations when he worked as a tour manager showing American students around Europe. It earned him money and the chance to indulge his fondness for music at the Covent Garden proms — albeit seated on the floor.

He briefed Margaret Thatcher before her press conferences at the 1979 General Election, was special adviser to the Secretary of State for Energy and later, special adviser to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Nigel Lawson.

A Whip, Parliamentary Under Secretary for Social Security, Minister of State for Transport, Minister of State for Local Government and Inner cities, he eventually joined the Cabinet as Chief Secretary to the Treasury, moving up to Secretary of State for Employment and then Secretary of State for Defence.

While Shadow Chancellor in 2000, he went on Radio 4's Desert Island Discs. His music selection attempted to be autobiographical and included favourites from parents and friends, including Mozart, Puccini, Wagner, Beethoven, Sibelius as well as Madonna and Cream.

"I didn't really enjoy it. For politicians, it was like any other interview seeking a bit of a headline. If they interview a pop star or football player, it's about the pinnacles of his or her career. With politicians, it's all about troughs, so it was slightly depressing, especially as I had a Roy Plomley memory of the programme."

He was re-elected to Parliament in a by-election in Kensington and Chelsea in November 1999 but last year proved fraught when he lost the Conservative party leadership ballot. Nevertheless, he has concentrated on other projects — on New Year's Day, he appeared in BBC2's *UK Confidential* talking about the Heath government and the 1971 Cabinet papers, specifically the U-turn on Government policy. He is particularly proud of a programme in the BBC2 series *Great Railway Journeys* series which was partly a biography of his father.

"I've more freedom and time now yet still seem incredibly busy. If I had to give an account of myself, I seem to rush from place to place but now have the opportunity to make space for new ventures. It's almost as though I've been afraid to give myself space until now; I'm so much in the habit of being busy." He pauses for a while then continues. "Yet even though I'm not particularly prominent in public life at the moment, when I sit back, my diary still fills; it's like snow falling. I have to ask myself how much I'm a passive participant, which is not ideal."

He returns to the subject of Sinfonia 21. "The Arts Council and other bodies do their bit and we recognise times are more difficult now and have reduced demands on outside funding to £45,000; most concerts are pre-funded. It's good to have a range of people involved and to have a broad base of support — those interested in the connection between science and music who may be Imperial graduates could be willing to help. Ideally, we'd like people to commit for three years as it gives us stability.

"I'd like part of my life to be taken up with a serious effort in the arts and the experience gained with Sinfonia 21 is extremely valuable; it's sharp end stuff as the business of how we get by financially requires a lot of effort. It's a constant struggle and anxiety to keep the show on the road, but we are determined to do it."



A UNIVERSITY EDUCATION MICHAEL PORTILLO ANSWERS QUESTIONS

What role does an institution like Imperial play within a parliamentary constituency?

My constituency of Kensington and Chelsea is full of national institutions — for example the museums of South Kensington — and their relationship with the local community is, of course, affected by being national. I feel a pride, as the MP representing Imperial, and what is achieved here.

Maintaining an orchestra like Sinfonia 21, which draws its audience from within and without the College, is just one way in which a national institution can relate to the locality.

What is your view of university education at present, specifically educational policy at a time when costs are rising, yet student figures are declining?

I am pleased that so many more people are able to go to university now than some years back. It is a great opportunity for people, and it brings benefits to them and to the nation.

But 'university' is a term now used to describe a very broad range of institutions and the courses vary a lot in their degree of rigour and their academic content. They cannot all be offered similar amounts of government funding in the name of equality. They are not equal. I am concerned that at the top end some of our great universities are struggling to compete with institutions in other countries.

Do you have a specific vision about where education should be going and how universities should develop in the future?

I believe that our best universities are under-funded and are likely to remain so as long as they depend on the drip feed of government subsidy. I believe we should progressively endow our best universities so that they can be freed from dependence on government funding.

Many of their peer group are so endowed. The government could use windfalls — for example from the sale of the bandwidth spectrum — to fund those endowments. The universities could be required, however, to set up bursaries and scholarships for students who cannot afford the fees, but who are highly able.

Incidentally, it is also alarming to me how few scientists are being turned out by British schools.

Imperial College can maintain its standards by taking outstanding students in large numbers from abroad, but there is a problem for our country if we ourselves are not producing scientists. Part of the problem is a shortage of good science teachers in schools, and that may well require exceptional payments to attract and retain them.