



Background Music.

Simon Russell Beale talks about the soundtrack of his life.

▶ **ACTOR SIMON RUSSELL BEALE** has spent mid-May sheltering in place in rural Wiltshire, England, admiring his new garden and listening to Verdi's Shakespeare operas as research for an upcoming book on the playwright. In the lyrical tenor that is familiar from his preternaturally sensitive performances at the Royal Shakespeare Company and National Theatre, Beale says over the phone that peonies in particular entrance him: they remind him of Lauren Bacall, who once brought Beale some after he performed *Uncle Vanya* in New York. Such anecdotes, told with almost childlike delight, pepper our meandering conversation, from his asking Esa-Pekka Salonen if they could rewrite Jean Cocteau's libretto for Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* when they performed it together to youthful memories admiring a book filled with photos of Laurence Olivier and Maggie Smith. "I know Maggie now and have never told



her that," he says, chortling. That he earnestly excuses the name-dropping in each instance aligns with a humble demeanor that often bends toward self-deprecation, particularly about the singing career he once thought he would undertake.

Classical music was a constant throughout Beale's nomadic childhood, which took him to Hong Kong, Libya, Singapore and Germany due to his father, a former surgeon general in the British army who had spent his youth as a chorister at St. Paul's Cathedral. "Because we were abroad, we kind of missed popular culture entirely," he says. "We all sang, every evening, and did terrible barbershop—*terrible!*—at weddings. God knows, the poor people there!"

At seven, Beale enrolled at St. Paul's, too. While he wouldn't wish boarding school on anybody, he remains grateful for the musical education and professionalism it instilled at a young age. "A chorister can literally sightread everything," he says. "I was put next to a senior chorister and just—learned. It was magical."

Yet Beale's performance anxiety never dissipated, despite constant appearances over the ensuing

fourteen years, whether on the piano and oboe or as a choral scholar at Cambridge University. There, each night, he would sing Evensong after fortifying himself with a Kit-Kat and glass of white wine. "I don't think I'm a natural musician—I was trained to be [one]," he says. "And I think I was in the wrong voice."

This doubt in part explains

"I know this sounds like false psychology, but I [become] somebody else," he muses, about acting. It's a marked difference from his last classical-music performance as an adult, singing the bass line in the eighth choir of Tallis's forty-part motet *Spem in Alium* at Salisbury Cathedral. "By the time [that part] comes in, you have no idea where you are!"

He creates a course for himself— "libretto, source material, analysis."

why Beale spent only about two weeks training to be an opera singer at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama under Rudolf Piernay, whose former students include Bryn Terfel. "Piernay was famous for that thing which all choral scholars have to do—breaking the voice down and building it up again," he explains. "You can't sing Verdi like a choral scholar."

That opera did not seem ideal for him was mutually understood. "[Piernay] didn't say I wasn't 'talented enough,'" he says. "But he obviously thought, 'What the hell is he doing here?'" This prompted an "absolutely outrageous" act: Beale requested an audition with the drama school. "Years later, I was acting with the [department] principal [who] said one of my audition pieces was fine and the other was dreadful!" he recalls, amused. Then his tone softens, his gratitude apparent. "[It] changed my life—and Piernay came to all my shows."

The career transition had its origins with a beloved teacher who instilled an interest in Shakespeare and cast him as Desdemona at fourteen. "I think he partly chose it because she has to sing the 'Willow Song,'" he says. He performed without worry, as he has done since in *Spamalot* on Broadway and *Candide* at the National Theatre.

he says. "It's just a wash of noise."

Beale has presented numerous acclaimed classical-music documentaries for the BBC, about the symphony and sacred choral music. Considering his chorister past, many assume the latter has long remained his musical focus. Not so. "In my twenties, [my taste] was the end of *Elektra*, Bach—the romantic, extreme, extraordinary," he says. Today, Brahms, Schubert and, in particular, Beethoven have become indispensable. "I think I met him too early to be interested [then]."

Verdi's Shakespeare operas, then, are not the only sounds filling Beale's lockdown. "I tend to give myself projects," he says. "I'm doing all the Britten operas at the moment." When asked if he concentrates on the music alone, an "Oh no!" from deep in his throat reveals a smile through the phone. He creates a course for himself—"libretto, source material, analysis"—and is careful not to play favorites. "*Peter Grimes* is a masterpiece, and it's more difficult to go through *Death in Venice*," he says. But he adds, with the enthusiasm of a completist, that "each gets the same amount of love." ■

Charles Shafatiah is an arts journalist whose work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Artforum* and other international publications.

© ANDREW CROWLEY/CAMERA PRESS/REDUX (PORTRAIT); © CAITLIN OCHS/THE NEW YORK TIMES/REDUX (TRIOLOGY); GERAIN LEWIS/ALAMY (VANYA)

At Stratford upon Avon, opposite page; *The Lehman Trilogy* in NY, below left, with Ben Miles and Adam Godley, 2019; *Uncle Vanya* at the Donmar, below right, with Helen McCrory, 2002