

Nigel Kennedy: Don't just sit there. Do something Polish

He's been away in his adopted home but now he's back to celebrate Polish culture on the South Bank and Aston Villa anywhere he can. Michael Church talks to Nigel Kennedy

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ABBIE TRAYLER-SMITH

Nigel Kennedy, pictured at his house in St John's Wood, north London, has a certain integrity behind his rebel-boy contradictions

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Bidden along to Nigel Kennedy's pretty, wisteria-hung cottage in St John's Wood, I find I'm not alone. Also waiting on the pavement are Kennedy's manager, his PR assistant, and a man from Reuters whose interview is scheduled to take place after mine. Ringing the bell gets no response, nor do any of his phones answer. Out jogging is the likeliest explanation, so we wait, and wait: this isn't auspicious. Eventually it turns out he's been here all along, embroiled in negotiations. Bounding down the steps and giving me a pulverising handshake, he looks the picture of health in his trademark Aston Villa shirt, explaining that he thought he'd "better wear it for the photograph".

This 53-year-old wild-child still gives himself totally to whatever he's doing, and we settle to talk amid the agreeable chaos of half-eaten sandwiches and half-drunk tea at his kitchen table, while his manager watches like a hawk. It's late afternoon, but he's still recovering from heavy-duty conviviality the night before.

At present he's doing Poland in a very big way. Having married a Polish lawyer named Agnieszka, having put together his own Polish jazz quintet, and with a house in Krakow plus a log cabin in the mountains near the Slovakian border, he's gradually become, he says with shining eyes, an honorary Polish citizen. And he now wants to give something back. When the South Bank Centre invited him to "do something Polish" to chime with this year's Chopin anniversary, he didn't hesitate: next weekend, the South Bank will become Poland in miniature.

"It's not going to be a map of Polish culture," he clarifies. "It's going to be an offering from what I've benefited from – people I've been lucky enough to work with, or hear. There's this hard work and discipline they've got, this inspiration and original way of looking at things – probably because of the socialist policy of teaching everybody equally. A toilet cleaner's kid can get as good an education as a banker's kid. But I don't know how long that will go on, the way Polish politics are going now." The jazz, klezmer, and classical luminaries who will stud "Nigel Kennedy's Polish Weekend" are in his view the pick of what his adoptive land has to offer: the classical pianist who will co-star with Nigel Kennedy's Chopin Supergroup is Janusz Olejniczak, who played the music behind the pictures in Polanski's *The Pianist*. On the kitchen table, beneath the debris, lie the piano scores of Chopin's Preludes and Nocturnes: he's already chosen nine "tracks" from them, and points out the beautiful "songs" he'll make from their melodic lines.

"I just want to share the good times I've had there with people over here," says Kennedy. "Everybody knows someone Polish now... there's so much more to Polish culture than plumbing and building." Then a thought occurs: "Hey – that's another exhibit we could have had! Over three days, we could have had some Polish cats building a house, right next to the fucking Thames, man." A piece of South Bank installation art? "Yeah! Build a house with no planning permission whatsoever – brilliant, man!" All he needs is the

materials, I suggest. "Got that, Tel?" At which Terri Robson, the woman who officiates as his agent, tour manager, life-coach, and factotum, suddenly looks weary.

It's sometimes been suggested that the Mockney manner is a put-on, out of which he will eventually grow, but pigs will sooner fly. The polite eight-year-old with the RP accent first heard on the BBC's *Town and Around* in 1964 is well and truly buried, and who's to say a style seriously adopted in later life is a "fake"? With Kennedy, the style is the man. Moreover, the one accent which isn't buried from his youth is his sound on the violin. As the son and grandson of leading classical cellists, and with a piano-teacher mother, he's stayed religiously faithful to his roots, preserving the most remarkable beauty of tone, whether playing classical, klezmer, or jazz.

The centrepiece of the South Bank bash is the inaugural outing of the Nigel Kennedy Orchestra of Life, an ensemble of conservatoire-trained Polish musicians who will play Bach and Duke Ellington, without a conductor but under his leadership. He created it, he says, out of frustration at the way his attempts to induce a similarly collegial approach at the Polish Chamber Orchestra – of which he was artistic director – were foiled by bureaucracy. "These cats are technically first rate, and they're gung-ho ready to go. And in rehearsals I was like, shit, it's one and a half fucking hours after we should have finished. An orchestra in Britain or Germany wouldn't have stood for that, but these players are ready to work until they drop, or until the music is right. And there's something different about their bow-speed. With most orchestras, it's either a warm sound, or a translucent one – but these have a combination of both."

He's also going back to Vivaldi with them, partly because he still loves the composer who helped make his fortune – through his recording of *The Four Seasons* – and partly because he intends to push Vivaldi's music into the 21st century. He's going to bring in the keyboard player from his jazz quintet, and his jazz bassist will add an improvised line below. Sacrilege? No more so than what he did with Mozart's *Violin Concerto No 4* two years ago, where one cadenza was pure jazz. It's worth remembering that a cadenza even in Mozart's day gave the soloist licence to show off: provided he stayed faithful to the spirit of the work, he could do what he liked.

But this sort of thing, when added to the swearing and spiky hair, was what aroused the ire of the die-hards, and propelled Kennedy into five years of musical self-exile. "It was definitely a crime to have become a household name and sold two million albums. Really uncool, money and notoriety. But all the artists I've liked have had some charisma, like [Friedrich] Kreisler or [Arthur] Rubinstein, or Yehudi or Isaac Stern. With them it wasn't just luck or technique. And when I was forgiven – when people got a bit kinder – was when I took my time off, and wasn't making lots of money. It's only when I quit something, that everyone likes me." Where does he place himself now? "I'd like to feel I'm still outside the classical music world, so that if I do the classical repertoire, I can do it from a different premise. I'm not going to be governed by the rules which bind most classical musicians." And the same, he says, goes for jazz: "Both worlds are conservative. You can't be really creative in either, without the style police being on your back." He has little respect for classical musicians such as Gidon Kremer and Daniel Barenboim who flaunt their cool by playing tangos: "That doesn't require any particular skill." And crossover? "Chocolate-coated stuff. It should mean something exciting, but it's normally just a classical cat playing straight over a Euro-disco beat." This man would make a refreshing critic.

Meanwhile he's got another own-brand trick up his sleeve for the Polish weekend: "Nigel Kennedy's World Cup Project: *England v Poland 1973*", in which film of that historic England disappointment will be projected. "I thought it would be a laugh to get a match between Poland and England, and do it as a silent film, with us improvising along." He's also hoping to get a commentator of some repute. Football – Aston Villa in particular – remains his grand passion: "All we need is 20 million for a good centre-forward. Who do you support?" When I confess that soccer isn't my thing, he's taken aback, but then says kindly: "It's not your fault. Sometimes I wish I wasn't so interested myself. It's got so corporate – captive watching, cushions on the seats, which is ridiculous because no one sits down. Like some fucking pensioners' home."

Gradually one realises that Kennedy's famous "contradictions" are not contradictions at all. As in a stick of Brighton rock, the integrity is stamped right through. It's entirely in character that the compulsive party-boy should seldom default on his 50-minute jog, or on his three hours' fiddle practice a day, and that he should

also be an unashamed technophobe. He doesn't have a computer: "I've not seen it help anyone's life – it just gives them more to do. They just get more pale, more fucking bug-eyed. All I know is how to get on to the Villa website with my wife's computer."

Asked for his principal aim in life, he replies: "To keep the people round me happy." That particularly includes his son Sark, 13, whose incarceration in a boarding school prevents as much father-son bonding as Kennedy would like: "Being a parent is probably one of the most important things you can do. But we always do the last game of the season, and in summer we get a lot of time together."

But the public can rest assured that Kennedy senior will never properly grow up. He and his jazz quintet are launching their new CD next week, on which guest-artist Boy George does a passable imitation of Tom Waits. But there was a spot of argy-bargy about the title, from which EMI insisted on removing two letters. It now reads SHHH!

Nigel Kennedy's Polish Weekend, South Bank Centre, 29-31 May

Curriculum vitae

1956 Born Brighton. Attends Yehudi Menuhin School, Surrey and Juilliard School, New York.

1972 Performs at Carnegie Hall in New York with Stéphane Grappelli.

1985 His debut recording of the Elgar Violin Concerto receives great critical acclaim.

1989 His recording of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* with the English Chamber Orchestra sells two million copies.

1991 Releases autobiography, *Always Playing*, and withdraws from public performance before making *Music in Colors* with Stephen Duffy.

1997 Receives Classical Brit award for "Outstanding contribution to British Music".

1998 Settles in Malvern, Worcestershire with partner, Eve, and son Sark.

1999 Releases *The Kennedy Experience* and *Classic Kennedy* to acclaim.

2000 Performs "Baba O'Riley" with The Who at the Royal Albert Hall.

2001 Wins "Male Artist of the Year Award" at Classical Brits.

2005 Declares "from now on, at least 50 per cent of my endeavour will be in the jazz field".

2006 Moves to Poland with his second wife, Agnieszka. First jazz album, *The Blue Note Sessions*, released.

2008 *A Very Nice Album*, with the Nigel Kennedy Quartet.

2010 Artistic Director for Polish Weekend at South Bank Centre, London.

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