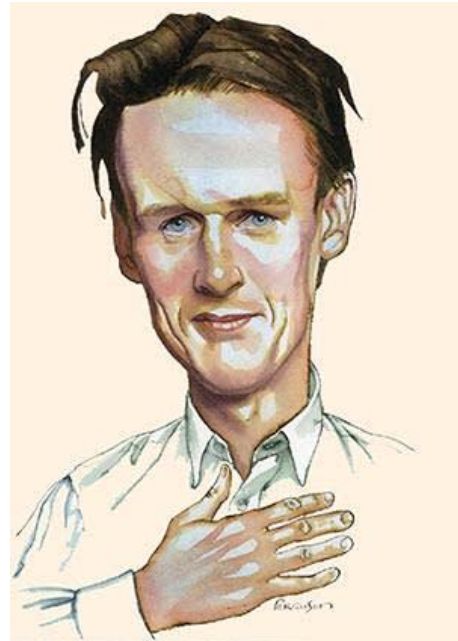


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Lunch with the FT: Ian Bostridge



At Wiltons restaurant in London, the scholar-turned-tenor talks about wealth distribution, witchcraft, and the sanctity of the concert hall

FT Andrew Clark NOVEMBER 9, 2013 Print this page 7

He could be a lawyer, a banker, a city clergyman. The dark suit, with light blue open-neck shirt, creates an impression both formal and informal: this is someone who has snatched time to relax in the middle of a working day.

Gliding in to Wiltons, an upmarket restaurant near Piccadilly in the throbbing heart of London, Ian Bostridge does not fit the stereotype of a leading tenor. **Taller than anyone in sight, and** thin enough to make you wonder when he last ate a decent meal, he has a bookish air, complemented by a mound of fine hair sweeping back from a high forehead.

Bostridge has just come, he tells me, from the west London home of pianist Julius Drake, with whom he has been rehearsing a recital of songs by early 17th-century English composer John Dowland. After lunch he will visit the London Library to research material for his new book. He is writing a discursive study based on Schubert's song-cycle *Winterreise*, which he has performed to acclaim in Germany and elsewhere. "I just go off at tangents and riff," he says with a chuckle. "I'm quite undereducated musically."

The table we have been assigned is, at my request, near the back of the restaurant, to ensure a reasonable amount of peace and privacy – though I needn't have feared. Wiltons is fabulously discreet: our alcove seats are not only amply cushioned but also sectioned-off from the main body of the room, with attentive, unfussy service. A bonus, observes Bostridge, is that, in contrast to most restaurants, there is no piped music, "and singers like quietness".

That was not the only reason for choosing Wiltons, he adds, as we sip water and weigh up menu options. Its proximity to the London Library was a consideration, as was the fact that lunch was on the FT. Dover sole at £50 evidently ranks as a treat for Bostridge, who is married to the writer Lucasta Miller and lives with her and their two school-age children in north London. But personal history also influenced his choice. He remembers this part of the city from childhood, when his father, a chartered surveyor, had an attic office here. "It has a resonance for me," he muses, as we tuck into the wild mushroom soup that we have both chosen.

At 48, Bostridge has reached the point in a career where experience and energy fuse most productively. As a celebrated interpreter of the music of Benjamin Britten, the English composer whose centenary falls on November 22, he is in great demand in the world's musical capitals – though Bostridge provokes extreme reactions for and against his singing style. His distinctive voice has recently taken on a lustre and carrying power that indicate ripe maturity, while his academic interests form a hinterland that will occupy him long after his singing career tails off.

Bostridge is unusual in that he started out as a scholar and only began singing professionally at the age of 27. By then he had achieved a first in modern history at Oxford university, a master's degree in the history and philosophy of science at Cambridge university, and then a doctorate from Oxford.

The subject of his doctoral thesis was the significance of witchcraft in English public life from 1650 to 1750. It was published as a book in 1997. More than a decade later a collection of essays, *A Singer's Notebook* (2011), followed, and while its emphasis was artistic, it included the observation that "music remains one of our few approved routes into exercising a magical sensibility, a sense of the supernatural, the transcendent, the ineffable".

Has Bostridge ever experienced the supernatural? As our genie-like waitress whisks away the soup plates and Bostridge takes his first sip of Chablis, it seems an appropriate moment to ask whether his intellectual pursuits ever coincide with personal experience.

Bostridge, who wears his intelligence lightly, replies without hesitation. "No. I'm open to the idea there could be such a thing [as the supernatural], and it would be nice to have a pleasant experience of it. I've experienced many uncanny coincidences – it's funny the way some things in life fit together. I wouldn't call them supernatural. In the physical world things happen in a regular way but I used to be interested in quantum physics, where all sorts of things can happen that can seem like miracles: one thing can be in seven different places at the same time."

Mention of miracles interrupts Bostridge's flow and, to my relief, saves me having to reveal my ignorance of quantum physics. "It's the individual that's a miracle," he continues, bringing the conversation back to basics. "When you have a child, it's strangely miraculous. If the sperm had hit the egg a second earlier, you could have a completely different person. But that's a natural phenomenon. 'Supernatural' suggests something beyond the natural. It just means things that humans can't explain."

The main course arrives: Bostridge's brown-coated sole meunière looks more appetising than my plain grilled sole, which has a lacklustre taste, even with delicious spinach and boiled potatoes to liven it up. But it seems a sin to discuss the fish when we can talk about music, food of the soul. I remind Bostridge of another of his assertions in *A Singer's Notebook*, that "western music has become one of the ways of talking about all the things we cannot talk about – the nature of existence, the luxury of wondering why we are here and why we behave the way we do".

In the rarefied world of the recital hall, has music become a substitute for religion? Punctuating his response with references to the philosophers Hegel and Schopenhauer and the poet Clemens Brentano, Bostridge refers to "an obscure German book I've

been reading that has never been translated ...It was all to do with sound decay, putting us in touch with time – a metaphysical idea of past, present and future all together, like a key to unlocking the world beyond yourself.”

He says anecdotal evidence suggests many of today’s audiences are looking for something similar. “As a musician you worry if [your work] has a social role but I’m constantly surprised by the number of people I meet after concerts who have been consoled and affected. It’s not just music lovers, it’s people in LA who know little about it.

“Much of what we call culture today is presented on a plate – the opposite of ‘This is wondrous and you have to make an effort’. Lieder [German art-song] cannot be presented like that, as a consumable. It may not be obvious at first why such music is enjoyable but it is consciousness-raising. It makes you think about what is valuable in life – the things music ultimately wants to address. It makes people less obsessed with consumerism, because a performance is not consumable or ownable. It’s not a commodity.”

That makes a classical concert sound not so different to spiritual contemplation, a quasi-religious rite – another point raised in Bostridge’s writings. In both contexts, religious and musical, a group of people sit quietly, often with a “mystical figure” (the priest/conductor) as intermediary. He elaborates: “The two places classical music emerged from were the church and the court, and they, or their modern equivalents, are still the poles around which it revolves today – the perceived sanctity and otherworldliness of the concert hall, and the glitzy glamour of the opera house.”

So, high culture will always be the preserve of the privileged and the initiated? Bostridge acknowledges the attempts that have been made to break down the perceived barriers – to make high art more accessible. He relates how he took his children this year to a rehearsal of Mozart’s Marriage of Figaro at the Royal Opera House. “They loved it. It was good that the production had a traditional look – you will always have people [in the audience] who are coming to it for the first time.”

After that personal aside, one of several family references that suggest the intellectual preoccupations in his life have a strong emotional counterbalance, he returns to the wider theme. “The arts are a luxury in one sense,” he says, adding a couple more potatoes to his rapidly emptying plate. “Art is part of the good life but it’s also part of what it means to be a human being. That’s what people were clear about in 1945. Art

has transcendent value and if you live in a democratic society, you want to bring it to as many as possible.”

I ask him how far he thinks this consensus holds good in Britain today. Only up to a point, he says. “It becomes tricky when you start applying the market principle, worrying about how many people listen to Radio 3 [the BBC’s classical music channel]. The argument now seems to be that if it’s not appreciated by a million consumers, it’s not worth it. People are fascinated by Tate Modernism – cow dung, all this in-your-face, provocative art – but I’m not sure what’s going on.”

The dessert menu arrives, and I wonder whether Bostridge will seize the opportunity to break off from his high-minded flow. He chooses bread and butter pudding, while I opt for fruit crumble. What we really need, he continues, is pluralism, for which he offers a simple definition. “A lot of things should be available to a lot of people – otherwise only the rich have access [to the things that lack mass appeal]. It’s more important we live in a pluralist society than in a democracy, because we don’t want to live in a society where everyone thinks the same. Vibrancy and variety, that’s the essence of life.”

Bostridge has never made a secret of his allegiance to Britain’s Labour party, so I encourage him to explain how his ideas about pluralism relate to political debate in the UK today. Informing me that, as a privately educated schoolboy (he won a scholarship to Westminster School), his sympathies once lay to the right, he outlines what sounds like a leftist manifesto. “We know how majoritarian tyranny can be oppressive – governments in democracies pandering to baser instincts than nobler,” he says, as our desserts arrive. He cites two areas where public debate is currently susceptible to “majoritarian tyranny”: immigration and income distribution.

“The political elite in this country don’t want to have the full, honest discussion about immigration. If the Conservatives can get one over Labour, they’ll do it, playing populist politics, playing on people’s fears,” he says. “A well-run, economically growing country needs immigration. Danny Dorling has written about it [in *Population 10 Billion*, a study of world population growth and the socioeconomic benefits of migration]. What we need is a balanced argument.”

And income distribution? The reason western economies are not working, he says, is that income distribution has been skewed. “The Labour party won’t say this but we need strong trade unions. Too much money is going to capital and not enough to labour. If capitalism is moderated [by even distribution of wealth], it works, it’s good

for everybody. But when it doesn't – Marx analysed this brilliantly in *Das Kapital* – you get crises of demand, so you end up with a super-elite and the rest of us."

Bostridge expresses his views not as a war cry but with gentle passion. "There's huge anxiety in middle-class London," he continues. "I don't see how my children are going to be able to afford to live here. Four or five generations of my family have lived in London. I love London. Gosh . . ."

Smiling sheepishly, Bostridge realises he has sounded off more than he might have wished. We order coffee and change the subject. I ask, in the light of his forthcoming performances of Britten's pacifist *War Requiem*, whether people are now too remote from the first world war for the centenary of its outbreak next year to register as anything more than a historical event.

His riposte is quick. "The danger is that you have people running from Goldman Sachs [to hear *War Requiem* at St Paul's Cathedral] to make themselves feel better. When we go to a performance, we feel we've gone through the war thing. But there are still people going out from this country to kill and be killed. Our government wouldn't say that. They'd say we're protecting people – which involves killing. I'm not a pacifist. I'm aware of the moral compromises every war involves."

So does art make us better people? Bostridge's raised eyebrows tell me we might need another lunch to answer that. His visit to the London Library is looking squeezed: he must pick up his daughter from school at 5pm. As I ask for the bill, he starts formulating a response. "Art does make us happier," he says. "It presses the right hormonal buttons. One of the greatest pleasures in my life is hearing my daughter sing to herself in the morning. It's such an expression of pure, unsullied joy."

Ian Bostridge performs in 'Curlew River' on November 14-16 as part of the Barbican Britten festival in London. His new recording of 'War Requiem' is on Warner Classics.