

Hardcover: UK

Classical DVDs

Answering the call of history

WMDs, George Bush, Cherie and Gordo: Tony Blair's memoir in just 799 words!

BY JOHN CRACE
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

I wanted this book to be different from the traditional political memoir. Most, I have found, are rather easy to put down. So what you will read here is not a conventional account of whom I met. There are events and politicians who are absent, not because they don't matter, but because they are part of a different story to the self-serving one I want to tell!

No, seriously guys, this is going to be well different. How many other world leaders use so many exclamation marks! And it is as a world leader that I'm writing for you about my journey. And what a journey! When I started in politics I was just an ordinary kind of guy. And you know what? I'm still an ordinary kind of guy — albeit one who has become a multi-millionaire and completely destabilized the Middle East!

You know, I had a tear in my eye when I entered No. 10 for the first time in 1997, though it wasn't, as the *Daily Mail* tried to claim, because I was choked with emotion at how far I had come since I was a young, ordinary boy standing on the terraces of St James' Park, watching Jacky Milburn play for Newcastle. It was because Gordon had hit me. Ah, Gordon! He meant well, I suppose, in his funny little emotionally inarticulate way.

I guess some of you will find it hard to believe, but I never really wanted to be a politician. But sometimes courage is about taking the difficult decisions and when Cherie said, "God is calling you to fulfill your destiny," I knew I had to listen. So it was with a heavy heart that I outmaneuvered Gordon over the leadership of the party after John's death — and whatever Gordo says there was never a deal struck at the Granita restaurant where he could definitely take over after my second term. Because I had my fingers crossed!

The first year in office was pretty exciting and it was great fun having my old mates like Anji in the office. (I'd tried to get in to her sleeping bag once when I was 16 but she kicked me out! Her loss!) The death of the People's Princess came as a blow — I always found the Royal Family a bit freaky! — but I had a real sense the public were willing me to succeed. A pity the same couldn't be said for the media who were only too willing to see the worst in the Bernie Ecclestone and Peter Mandelson affairs. Looking back, I feel bad about forcing Peter to resign. But at the time it was him or me. So what the hell!

I find also that Mo Mowlam's part in the Northern Ireland peace process has been rather overstated. So to put the record straight, it was all down to me. The talks had reached an impasse and I said to Gerry and David, "Look guys,

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we're on a journey," and they said, "Cool Tony, We're with you."

If only Iraq had been that simple. I know there are some of you out there who want me to apologize, but life isn't that simple when there's a war crimes indictment at stake. Look, I feel the deaths of our servicemen every bit as keenly as if the bullets had pierced me like stigmata, but sometimes one has to just stand up and do the right thing even if the evidence isn't there. OK, I will admit I did have a bit of a wobble — Cherie had to give me big cuddles, know what I mean! — when it turned out Saddam didn't have WMDs, but I honestly never lied about them. It was just one, small, teeny mistake and everyone tore me to pieces! Give us a break! And for the record I didn't always have a plan to go to war. The first I heard of it was when Statesman George — Top bloke! Top thinker! — phoned to say US troops were going in!

I was pretty fed up when everyone failed to see what we had achieved in Iraq, but an audience with the Pope, who said, "It is you who should be baptizing me," soon cheered me up. And I felt a sense of duty to protect the country from Gordon's incompetence. "You're just waiting until everything's about to go pear-shaped," he would yell. As if! It was only my darling John Prescott's desire to be out of the limelight as my deputy that prompted my resignation. Selfless little old moi!

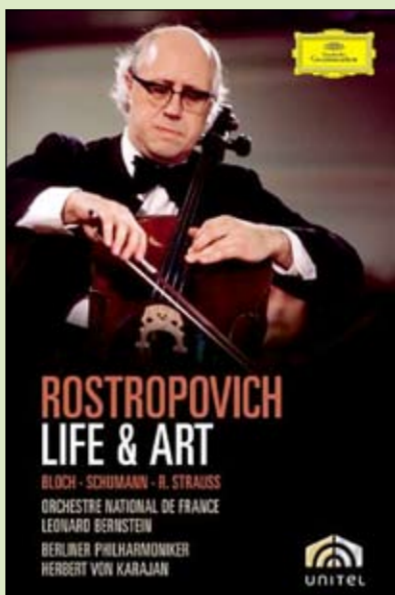
Yet, though I feel proud of my achievements and sad at the direction the Labour party is now taking, my journey is not over. It continues ever onwards into farce. May my blessings rain upon the Middle East!

Digested read, digested: A journey... along the path of self-righteousness.

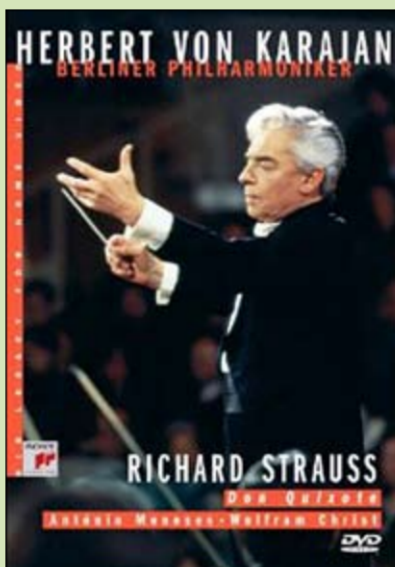


OTELLO

Antonenko, Poplavskaya, Alvarez
Conducted: Muti
Unitel Classics 701408

ROSTROPOVICH:
LIFE AND ART

Bloch, Schumann, Strauss
Bernstein, Karajan
DG Unitel 073 4381



STRAUSS

Don Quixote
Karajan, Berlin Philharmonic
Sony SVD 46389



STRAUSS

Don Quixote, Ein Heldenleben
Karajan, Berlin Philharmonic
Sony 86697195449

A new DVD version of *Otello*, widely considered to be Verdi's masterpiece, is an important event. Issued in March, it's based on a production at the Salzburg Festival in 2008. This was the first new *Otello* to be staged there since 1970.

Otello and *Desdemona* are played by relatively young soloists, the Latvian tenor Aleksandrs Antonenko and the Russian soprano Marina Poplavskaya. Iago is the somewhat older Spanish baritone Carlos Alvarez.

There's no doubt which of these three makes the biggest impression. Poplavskaya has a truly dynamic voice. You have no inkling when you first see her, huddled in an oversized jacket, what an explosive presence she will prove when she finally sings. She is in every way a major discovery, and this *Otello* is certain to catapult her into international stardom. She sounds a natural for Isolde, for example.

Otello himself is a titanic operatic role, and some critics at the Salzburg performances expressed doubts as to whether Antonenko was equal to it yet. Here he certainly takes second place to his opposite number (and she has a lot less to sing than he does), and to the forceful, caustic Iago of Alvarez too. Nevertheless, he does have his moments, though vigor rather than feeling is probably his strongest suit.

The production, directed by Stephen Langridge, features a relatively bare stage, with a glasslike platform in the middle, eventually to be smashed by Iago, and the central section of the back wall devoted to video projections. Color is provided by the chorus, exotically dressed Cypriots in an early scene, including some girls who try to seduce an innocent-seeming teenager.

Riccardo Muti conducts the Vienna Philharmonic in what is a near-ideal rendering of this mighty score. The arrival of the Venetian ambassadors, for instance, is almost unbearably intense, as is the whole of the third act (the last act is less successful). The DVD is topped off with a 30-minute bonus item in which the soloists and Langridge (but not Muti) engage in chat about the opera. Yet Muti is in some ways the star of this production. He must have known *Otello* supremely well from his days at La Scala where it was always the opening opera of each new season.

This is an exciting release, with many impressive elements. This is not to say, however, that it's superior to the more sophisticated Met version of 1996 with Domingo, Fleming and Morris, conducted by Levine. That version remains unchallenged. However, a dream ticket with Domingo, Morris and Poplavskaya would probably stand against all comers.

Karajan was a great proponent of Richard Strauss, in contrast to his rather wavering commitment to Mahler. Three DVDs of him conducting Strauss's tone poem *Don Quixote* have come to hand, two from Sony and one from Deutsche Grammophon, and it's inevitable to ask which is to be recommended. All performances are with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra.

The two Sony DVDs were issued in 2005 and 2008 respectively, the former standing alone, the latter in combination with *Ein Heldenleben* ("A Hero's Life"). The version on Deutsche Grammophon is partly concealed from the casual browser as it's included in a DVD entitled *Rostropovich: Life and Art*. While not in any sense a cello concerto, *Don Quixote* has a prominent part for a solo cello, and Rostropovich's performance, with Karajan on the podium, dates from 1975 (the DVD was issued in 2008).

The *Rostropovich* DVD is hugely attractive on many counts. At 131 minutes it's tremendous value for money. It not only contains the *Don Quixote* with Karajan but also Schumann's *Cello Concerto* and Bloch's *Schelmo* with Leonard Bernstein and the Orchestre National de France, filmed in Paris in 1976. And there's a bonus half-hour film about Rostropovich that is endlessly fascinating.

So what of the *Don Quixote*? It's a live performance in the Berliner Philharmonie and is played by Rostropovich with characteristic attack and exuberance. The sound quality is outstanding, with great presence, each instrument being vividly highlighted in the sound-picture whenever it has a prominent moment. Visually it's brightly lit, and is in every way a buoyant and dramatic occasion.

The surprise that comes when comparing the two Sony DVDs is that they contain the same performance of *Don Quixote*, filmed in 1986. Clearly the *Heldenleben* (filmed in 1985) was added subsequently to give better value and a new lease of life to the *Don Quixote* recording.

These Sony versions are quite different from the Deutsche Grammophon one with Rostropovich. They're a studio performance, and clearly intended to be definitive. The feeling is of a dark studio world, with the various key instrumentalists, and needless to say Karajan himself, dramatically lit against the Stygian background. Karajan had a part, probably the controlling one, in the editing, and the effect is of an all-of-a-piece work of art, with the visuals, recorded sound and performance quality all receiving the closest possible attention.

The choice, then, will depend on the couplings. But it's hard indeed not to want both these Karajan versions of one of Strauss's most lovingly detailed scores.

Softcover: UK

To be or not to be: Is that the question?

In 'Fame,' Daniel Kehlman asks disturbing questions regarding the nature of communication and the representation of reality

BY ALBERTO MANGUEL
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

Not long ago, we used to exist in space and time. Physical presence was a condition of being. In any given place, we were the features and attitudes we showed the world; at any specific moment, we were the things we did and said among our fellow humans. Today instead we are a conjured-up phantom on a solitary screen, a pseudonymous and unharbored e-mail address, a disembodied voice that can be summoned by anyone, day and night, like a spirit at a séance. We have solved Hamlet's question: We are and are not simultaneously. We have become ghosts.

Fame, by the 35-year-old Daniel Kehlman, is a novel made up of nine ghost stories. In each one, the protagonist's existence is virtual, and depends on something outside him or herself: a mobile phone, an uncritical audience, a stranger's imagination, a constantly changing technology. In the first story, a man's identity is usurped (or replaced) by a cellphone with calls intended

for another. In the second, a pretentious writer conceives of a novel without a protagonist, trapped in an illusory world that technology has rendered real. In the third, a fictional character refuses to die, or, as the narrator puts it: "When it comes to death, Rosalie is hard to impress." Like a Pirandello character, the terminally ill Rosalie exists in her author's mind, but also outside. Of her own fictional free will, she (the only victorious heroine in *Fame*) has managed to break through the strictures of literary convention, and will not come to her established end.

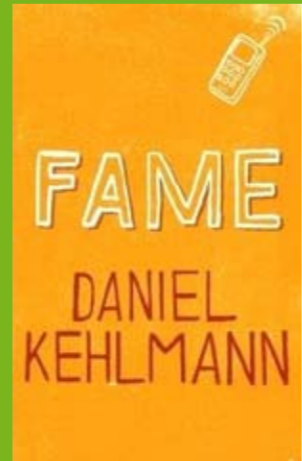
"Yes," confesses the narrator, resigning himself to the loss of his own creation, "it could have made a really good story, a little sentimental, granted, but with humor to counterbalance the melancholy, the brutality offset by a touch of philosophy. I had worked the whole thing out. And now?" Now the doctor who would have helped Rosalie commit suicide disappears. Rosalie is cured. "And while you're at it," the

author tells her in a fit of literary generosity, "be young again. Start from the beginning again!" Rosalie may do just that.

Kehlman's remaining characters complete a kind of virtual pageant of forlorn identities: an actor given over to his dramatic self; a woman lost in a desolate place, perhaps Central Asia, whose cellphone is no longer working and who is unable to communicate with the locals; a best-selling writer of self-help books who is incapable of helping himself; an electronic wizard who communicates in a fictional cyber-language ("Not a spark about how lordoftheflakes, icu_lop, rubendaddy, and pray4us had responded to my postings") but knows himself unworthy of a fictional story; a communications expert who believes in wishful thinking; a couple dropped in the middle of an African war zone with their now useless electronic devices.

Kehlman relentlessly weaves his stories in and out of one another, so that his characters

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appear and reappear as on a minuscule stage; it's as if their

vaunted world of limitless communication were in fact a tiny patch of criss-crossing paths and destinies, of surface only. "Mind you," reflects one of them at the end of the book, "if this was a story, something would happen and things would become hard, and if they didn't become hard, then it wasn't a story." Things don't become "hard" in *Fame*, and therefore there isn't a story here in the traditional sense. What happens to each of the characters is a consequence of the world he or she believes in, that virtual realm of make-belief bereft of narrative drama. Beneath the surface, however, run the disturbing questions Kehlman asks regarding the nature of communication and the representation of reality. Fame is not reality; it is the image we value in what counts for us in reality, the made-up face we show the world.

In this sense, the real subject of Kehlman's book is language: its fiery possibilities of granting us a name, its humiliating

shortcomings in telling who we are, its ignominious deceptions and false promises, its ingenious devices to help us translate the experience of ourselves into the experience of another. In Kehlman's hands, language sometimes grows into baroque excrescences and convolutions, sometimes shrinks down to cryptic text messages, as if trying through the very large and the very small to cover all possibilities for expressing our everyday world. Carol Brown Janeway's translation is an extraordinary feat: She has been able to render, with humor and verisimilitude, and without the slightest feeling of artificiality, the various styles and vocabularies that Kehlman so deftly uses.

In his best-selling novel, *Measuring the World*, Kehlman used his verbal skills to follow his 19th-century characters in a tangible, painfully physical exploration of our planet; in *Fame*, he has turned his eyes on the unwitting explorers themselves, survivors in the 21st

century, oblivious of their own identities and overconfident in their devices. By and large, Kehlman seems to say, we have relinquished reflective thought, memory, perspicacity and our sense of self to these gadgets that speak to us from nowhere or anywhere, take pictures of things that our eye doesn't bother to see, display dwarfish images for us to peruse with Lilliputian keenness, pretend to link us with countless supposed objects of desire, while they incessantly repeat, like the genie in the bottle: "Ask me anything, and trust me, trust me, trust me."

"I find it eerie," says one character about her recently acquired cellphone. "It makes everything unreal." That obvious unreality has become what most of us take for real. It has come to stand, not as an instrument to link us to the world, but as the world itself, that which we take to be the world's true image and sound.

Alberto Manguel's *A Reader on Reading* is published by Yale