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The pioneering percussionist

Photo Gavin Smith

Tomorrow Evelyn Glennie premieres the latest work written for her. She's aiming for a repertoire, she tells Ismene Brown

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EVELYN Glennie burst into the room like a small exploding firework, hair flying, panic on her face. Sorry she was late for our interview, she said, but her conductor had just that minute stood her up for her big premiere at the Barbican.

Michael Tilson Thomas, due to conduct Christopher Rouse's new percussion concerto, *Der gerettete Alberich*, with the LSO tomorrow night, had decided that his tendinitis was too painful to allow him to conduct both Mahler's Fifth Symphony and the Rouse. Glennie had to get the word out to find another conductor to be ready in a fortnight.

Alberich, inspired by Wagner's *Ring* cycle, is a prestigious piece. The LSO is one of four orchestras who commissioned it for Glennie from the admired American composer. It was premiered by the Cleveland Orchestra under Christoph von Dohnányi in January. The Philadelphia and Baltimore Symphony are the other two commissioners, and it will be recorded by the Philharmonia. The European premiere is a highlight of the Barbican's 'Inventing America' season.

At such cruelly short notice Glennie's alternative choices were unavailable. Tomorrow therefore a brave, unknown American conductor called Marin Alsop will step into the breach, having learned the Rouse from scratch in days, putting both women through considerable stress - and Tilson Thomas will take over at the interval in the Mahler.

It's a shock to realise that such things can happen in the superstar league that Glennie now inhabits. Even as a prodigious Aberdeen schoolgirl she was a celebrity, and now at 32 has a pull that makes nonsense of the usual musical prejudices and barriers.

Many young composers have found that to write a piece for her opens undreamed-of doors - when she played James MacMillan's *Veni, Veni, Emmanuel* in America, he was given a double commission by Rostropovich.

She seems to be an irresistible force. Yet in person she appears unaffected and gentle, the steel well hidden.

"My family wasn't at all involved in music, so there was no pushing whatever, just a natural growth. When I made up my mind to be a soloist", she says in her lilting accent, "I just assumed the world was full of solo percussionists. In a way this ignorance proved quite healthy."

Glennie's voice is soft and musical, her delivery slightly prim but punctuated by a bell-

like laugh. It doesn't give a hint of her deafness, and coupled with her Rosanna Arquette looks, it is a beguiling disguise for someone possessing such resolve that her husband, Greg Malcangi, once said, "Margaret Thatcher executed more U-turns than Evelyn ever did."

Twelve years ago, she was driving a van loaded with hired instruments to any small hall where they would engage her. She badgered amateur music societies in that charming, irresistible way. She effectively paid to play with them.

"If you want to create a *dent*, you have to do something. I never visualised myself out of work. I thought, no matter what happens, I will create the repertoire and present it in such a way that orchestras will not refuse to play this."

They did not refuse. She now earns big money, enough to cover her breathtaking £150,000 annual transport costs for her instruments, run a large Tudorbethan house in Huntingdonshire, run an office, buy an armada of exotic instruments wherever she goes, and put some aside to commission new composers.

She has five core percussion kits dotted round the world (to avoid customs problems). She has an accomplished site on the Internet's world wide web called simply "evelyn.co.uk", where you may hear her demonstrate various instruments, or click on a map of the world to discover, in your continent, some of her 100-plus concerts every year from now till 2001 (so far). She has inspired a new craze percussion - the new BBC Young Musician of the Year, Adrian Spillett, is a percussionist.

CRITICS have sighed that this awesome artist ought to play more consistently good music, that some second-rate composers are getting aired as star-vehicles, that percussion isn't out of the woods yet as a serious solo contender.

Surprisingly, Glennie agrees. "In my career I've performed nearly 70 concertos, and there are over 300 pieces in these cupboards behind us. And I would say there are only about 10 that I really enjoy playing - five would be my first choices, another five would be couplings."

But playing dodgy music, it appears, is virtually unavoidable in a career where there is no track record. Like the glass harmonica and celesta before it, the marimba (a melodic form of xylophone) has excited a few composers, but one good Paul Creston concerto does not make a repertoire. Drums and gongs are big in rock and ethnic, but not in the concert hall.

"I knew I wouldn't last if I couldn't bring in good music," says Glennie. "Early on I could see in the eyes of the orchestral players that the pieces weren't grabbing them, and I felt like saying, look, please be patient! This will work out in the end! A lot of pieces I did were *not* good, but I could either sit at home and not play, or I could play this bad piece. And I decided to play the bad piece but project it in such a way that it didn't seem quite so bad."

Thanks to her television appearances, most people now knows what Glennie projection is - that "visual" appeal that comes so naturally to her. She does odd things: she plays a theatrical trick on the audience at the start of the new Rouse work; in July she has a performance in Spitalfields Market Opera as part of the City of London Festival in which a painter on stage reacts in paint to her sounds.

She plays in bare feet, not as a sexy gimmick (though it is sexy, all the same), but all the better to hear with. Glennie's deafness has been much misrepresented. You would think, from some of the coverage about her, that she was locked in a silent world, using only visual clues to make music for the benefit of "normal" people.

Part of the reason for the website is to put this potty idea right. In a "Hearing Essay", Malcangi writes that hearing is "basically a specialised form of touch", of picking up

vibrations - his wife simply has developed, to phenomenal pitch, the spectrum of feeling sounds in her body, and even imagining them, that we all have to some degree, and which complements the tiny residue of normal hearing left to her.

She can use the phone, watches television, listens to CDs, holding a speaker between her legs. "All I want is to talk about music," she says impatiently, "and it really frustrates me when there's still this incessant pushing to have straight answers [about what she can and cannot hear]. Sounds may be distorted, but you have to be *dead* not to respond in some way to music. There's too much of this categorising - oh this is deafness, this is blindness. And all this hurts after a while."

Glennie's crusade, little by little, is paying off. She has spent the first dozen years of her career opening not only ears to the pioneer country of percussion but minds too. Her deafness has shown us a new definition of musicality, one so refined and exciting that it may even be a cause for envy.

Evelyn Glennie plays with the LSO tomorrow at the Barbican (0171 638 8891); on July 2 in the City of London Festival ; on August 11 in the BBC Proms