

of time'



Paddy McAloon, left, has carried on writing songs while his fellow Prefab Sprout band members turned their backs on music

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"It's calmed down, but I don't really hear bass frequencies," he says. "I can't stand in front of big instruments like a drum kit or a bass, but I can play my machines at a low level."

These illnesses aside, McAloon's retreat seems like a simple lifestyle choice. He was never particularly enamoured with the grind of the rock 'n' roll life and the sacrifices it demanded. "I've witnessed bands on tour and I've thought: 'You've spent too long on a bus, too long in male company, too long drinking, too long in your own little bubble,'" he says. "I couldn't see that as any life for a sensible person." Married to Victoria with three pre-teen daughters who "find it very strange that I could possibly have made a living like someone from High School Musical", he values "the texture of the school run, smoking a cigar in the garden, the nice little things. I don't think you can unify those two lives very easily."

It's all a long way from the days of hot dogs and jumping frogs. Did he ever enjoy being a pop star? "Over the last few years I've had such a downer on myself I've disowned it," he says. "I felt like, 'What a waste of time'. I really wish I could feel more philosophical about it and tell myself that I had a good time, but for some unfathomable reason I get very melancholy about it."

Considering he's an anti-nostalgist who admits to "cultivating amnesia" regarding his past and is heretical when it comes to 1985's wonderful Steve McQueen – "I'm not sure the second side is up to much, personally" – why has he returned to Let's Change the World with Music? "My manager listened to it and said there's still a demand for what I do and people are still interested," he says. "He talked me into it, but I like it. I like my singing and the intentions of some of the songs."

It is indeed a beautiful record. Sincere, romantic and at times crushingly beautiful, musically it's in thrall to Quincy Jones and Prince, while lyrically it marks the point in the Prefab Sprout story where McAloon's writing turns away from poetic obfuscation and seeks out a kind of profound simplicity. The title is tongue-in-cheek and deadly serious. "She's richer than money, bigger than fame, and love is the reason I'm playing this game," he sings at one point, a lovestruck suitor wooing his mistress. From most writers this would be an empty platitude; in McAloon's case it has all the force of a heartfelt manifesto. "There is something mysterious about the power of music, the way it seeps into people's lives and seems like it's conveying some kind of information, though we're not quite sure what it is," he says. "I keep coming back to that."

I tell him my pet theory: that his self-inflicted exile is really a kind of heroic protest against the cheapening of music, a last stand against disposable culture. "There is something in that," he says. "I don't like the climate of music being something that people expect to be given with a newspaper. I resent that. When I saw Radiohead releasing their record in that 'honesty box' way I felt that was a craven gesture. Try that if you're a plumber. It's Stockholm Syndrome, identifying with the pirates so badly that you give it away for nothing."

This all sounds rather precious and puffed, but really it's not. McAloon is funny, direct, self-deprecating and a real joy to converse with. He's also a pop tart at heart, at 52 still infatuated with the possibilities of the three-minute symphony. Among his daughters there has recently been, he says, "much whispering about Katy Perry's I Kissed a Girl. I like the cheek of it, the calculated naughtiness of it." He laughs. "I like to think my instincts are still there, that I'm still functioning as a Tin Pan Alley man." ■

Let's Change the World with Music is out now on Sony/Kitchenware.

Michael Tumelty



Gustav Mahler is one of the most influential and popular composers of all time. If you want to pull in a crowd to your concert promotion, programme a Mahler symphony. If you want to build a long-range core into an orchestral season, run a cycle of his nine-and-a-bit symphonies and spread it over a number of seasons. If you want to be properly completist, make that a cycle of his 10 symphonies, using Deryck Cooke's authoritative (though not to everyone) fleshed-out torso of the 10th symphony. Or, if you are a new music director of an orchestra and want to have a long thread to your developing relationship with your new orchestra, programme the symphonic cycle at the rate of one per season, which is what Stéphane Deneve is doing in Scotland with the RSNO.

Mahler is box office. He speaks to Everyman. His music pulsates with a unique mix of the banal and the profound, the earthy and the celestial, the commonplace and the visionary, the ravishingly beautiful and the grotesquely ugly. Wrapped up in a Mahler symphony you will find wheezy barrel-organ tunes, military-style marches, gentle pastoral scenes, rowdy village scenes, utter serenity and vicious irony, sentiment, schmaltz and terrifying drama, all expressed in abstract orchestral language.

All the world and all the emotions are in a Mahler symphony, and that is what the composer intended. He was, and is, incredibly influential. Listen to some of Shostakovich's scherzos. Without Mahler they would be unthinkable.

Mahler died in 1911. But he was only invented in 1967 by Leonard Bernstein. And that is probably the single most outrageous sentence I have penned in 30 years of professional journalism across several newspapers.

It's arrant nonsense to suggest such a thing. Mahler has had many champions, going back to his own time and across a spectrum of great conductors. My own introduction came through the work of Bruno Walter, one of the first pioneering champions of Mahler's music. Terminal addiction came specifically through Otto Klemperer's recording of the Second Symphony, The Resurrection, with the Philharmonia

Leger lines

Orchestra and chorus, and the almighty soloists Elisabeth Schwarzkopf and Hilde Ross-Majdan. To this day I have not heard this symphony bettered. It hits me every time.

Yet for all the championship, Mahler was a peripheral figure. I remember, impatiently curious as a young man, tearing off to the library to find a book that would tell me about this amazing character whose music simultaneously bewitched and scared the hell out of me.

As with many moments of intimate trauma that we all experience, one single image burns indelibly into the memory. I will never forget the impact as I hit the library, looked for Mahler, and turned up a book in the venerable Master Musicians series entitled Bruckner and Mahler. I can feel it now, the utter horror of realising that this man, whose music had me

"All the world and all the emotions are in a Mahler symphony ... it's what he intended"

by the throat, merited only a shared volume with another composer of the same period. I was so embarrassed that I shut up about my obsession with Mahler. Then, if memory hasn't distorted the chronology, came 1967.

It was a landmark year because it saw the launch of the first recorded cycle of his symphonies, played by Leonard Bernstein and the New York Phil with the LSO playing No. 8. Bernstein, heart on sleeve, passionate, incandescently intense, often over the top, catapulted Mahler into the wider world and into cult status where, for many, he remains. Mahler was the last true bastion of epic Romanticism and one of the pioneers of modernism.

Whatever you think of Bernstein, these are great and important performances, now collected together in a new 12 CD boxed set and issued by Sony at around £50.

The set includes Bernstein's essay, Mahler: His Time Has Come, and, rivetingly, on disc two, a famous set of recollections of musicians and contemporaries who knew and worked with Mahler the conductor. It also features the personal recollections of Anna Mahler, the composer's daughter. A stupendous and historic reissue that a new generation can now discover for itself. ■