

OUT AND ABOUT WITH...

James Ehnes *Violinist*

FAMILY MAN:
on tour with wife Kate
and daughter Caroline

Earlier this year, Canadian violinist James Ehnes announced that he would be briefly taking a sabbatical so that he could be around for the birth of his first child. Six months later, he is firmly back on the concert trail – this October sees him perform Brahms's Violin Concerto with the London Symphony Orchestra under Valery Gergiev at New York's Avery Fisher Hall.

It's been an exciting few months. How's family life suiting you?

It's great. My ladies (wife Kate and daughter Caroline) are right here with me. We've been travelling around all summer, which has been very new. Neither of us knew what to expect – travelling with the baby – but it's been fantastic and we've been having a lot of fun.

And the fun continues with some major engagements in the fall. How much are you looking forward to playing with the LSO?

A lot. This will be my fourth or fifth engagement with them so I feel I know the orchestra reasonably well, but it's going to be my first time performing with Maestro Gergiev. I know him well and he's been a good friend for a long time; when I was about

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18, I played for him and he took me under his wing, bringing me over to his White Nights Festival in Russia. He's been very supportive of me over the years but we've never had the chance to play together, so it'll be very special.

You're playing the Brahms quite a lot this season, aren't you?

This fall is going to be unusual for me in that sense. I usually have a lot of different pieces going on. It just so happens that up in Canada I'm playing the opening week with a few different orchestras, and for whatever reason they've all asked for Brahms! Playing something over and over can be nice in terms of security, but actually I think a bit of a challenge will be remaining fresh, and there's a real danger of losing the magic after playing four or five weeks in a row. I do find that I'm at my best if I'm rotating my repertoire a little bit more consistently than that.

One way of guaranteeing a little variety is by playing with your new Ehnes Quartet. When did you set that up?

Three of us have been friends for more than 20 years, and all of us have been playing together in mixed contexts for at least a decade. About three summers ago I started the idea of playing quartets with these three friends and that we would make our recorded debut with Mendelssohn's Op. 12 String Quartet, to go with my recording of Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto. But then Amy (Schwartz Moretti), the other violinist, got pregnant and we put together the Octet for the disc instead. Amy was sad about it and was, like, 'I was really looking forward to playing a bunch of quartets – let's do it anyway'. So she organised a concert for us.

And clearly it went well...

Yes! It was really intense – we got together for three days and put together a very big, difficult programme. We had such an immensely rewarding experience that pretty much on the spot we decided that we would need to make this a priority. The way our four lives are, it's never going to be able to be the main focus for what any of us do, but the repertoire is so rich and so varied and we get along so well – both personally as well as musically – that whatever spare time we've got, this is the thing above all else that we want to do.

Often soloists compare the social life enjoyed by chamber musicians favourably to their own lonelier existence. Does that apply to you?

I can definitely understand why others would say that. However, I've been really lucky for the last little while. My wife was a ballet dancer but she's stopped dancing and started doing a lot of travelling with me, so the last couple of years I've been not lonely at all. We've been having a wonderful time. And now with little Caroline coming along too I feel very fortunate – I'm not stuck in this tradition of being in a city where I don't know anybody and I'm all by myself. ■

James Ehnes plays Brahms's Violin Concerto with the LSO at Avery Fisher Hall on 22 Oct