

Interview: Steve Coogan

BY READERS DIGEST

15TH JAN 2019 CELEBRITIES



Audio Coming Soon

Instagram

Bestselling book summaries in 15-minute fast or audio segments. Easy Listening!

Learned

British actor and comedian Steve Coogan gives Eva Mackevic an unlikely lesson in “dealing with idiots” and achieving the coveted state of inner zen as you get older

Steve is exhausted. Last night saw him parading up and down the red carpet in a kilt at the London premiere of his new film, Stan & Ollie, and he's been doing interviews since this morning. He's also going to a BAFTA Q&A after this, his publicist informs me as I shuffle back and forth outside of Steve's hotel suite, waiting for him to finish a phone call. Obviously, I think, he'll be irritable and try to get rid of me as soon as possible. When I'm finally beckoned in, I find him slumped in a massive Edwardian chair, stretching lazily like a cat. He's wearing a cosy, grey jumper, and my eyes are immediately drawn to his goofy socks with big, red blotches. He jumps up to shake my hand, and gallantly fixes a drooped cushion on my chair.



“My parents used to read Reader's Digest,” he says, sitting down across from me. “Nowadays we have all these different search engines, all this malarkey, but Reader's Digest was a great way of curating and getting out stories that wouldn't normally reach people.” I'm immediately put at ease: while I can tell by the frequent stuttering and surreptitious yawns that Steve's clearly tired, he exudes peace and warmth. Not exactly what I expected from a notoriously caustic satirist who's verbally demolished everyone from Jeremy Clarkson to Donald Trump. Does he consider himself difficult to work with, I wonder?

"That's why I don't do social media—because it's dealing with people who are idiots"

“[I was difficult] early on, when I didn't know what I was doing,” he tells me in his deep, characteristically nasal voice, delectably stretching every vowel. “As you get older—you don't know this yet—you realise it's not just right to be nice to people, it's actually easier. I try to find the good in people and give them the benefit of a doubt.” “It's such hard work though,” I mutter in response.

“I know!” he exclaims. “That's why I don't do social media. Because it's dealing with people who are idiots. I know that I would waste a lot of time getting sucked into an argument with someone I don't need to argue with. There's no point, because if you want to convince someone your opinion is right, an argument will very rarely resolve something. The way to communicate with people, I think, is to tell stories. If you tell a story that moves someone, you may make them think about things in a slightly different way.”

The story of Laurel and Hardy—the subject of Coogan's new film in which he plays Laurel—is one such story, I observe. Their wholesome and innocent brand of slapstick comedy feels almost alien today. “That's very true,” Steve concurs. “I like that it's very un-cynical. I've done acerbic, biting, edgy comedy and it's really enjoyable. But it's only enjoyable like giving the finger to somebody is enjoyable,” he laughs. “Ultimately it doesn't make you feel better. It might make you feel better in that instant and I feel that's the case with a lot of comedy, but with Stan and Ollie, it's very timeless, it sees the humanity in people, it tries to lift people up rather than push them down.”



He admits that he was flattered to be considered “good enough” to play Stan Laurel. It's a challenging role which involved portraying the famous comedian as both how he was on screen and in real life. Not to mention the technically challenging dance routines, make up and costumes. Did Steve relate to Stan Laurel on a personal level?

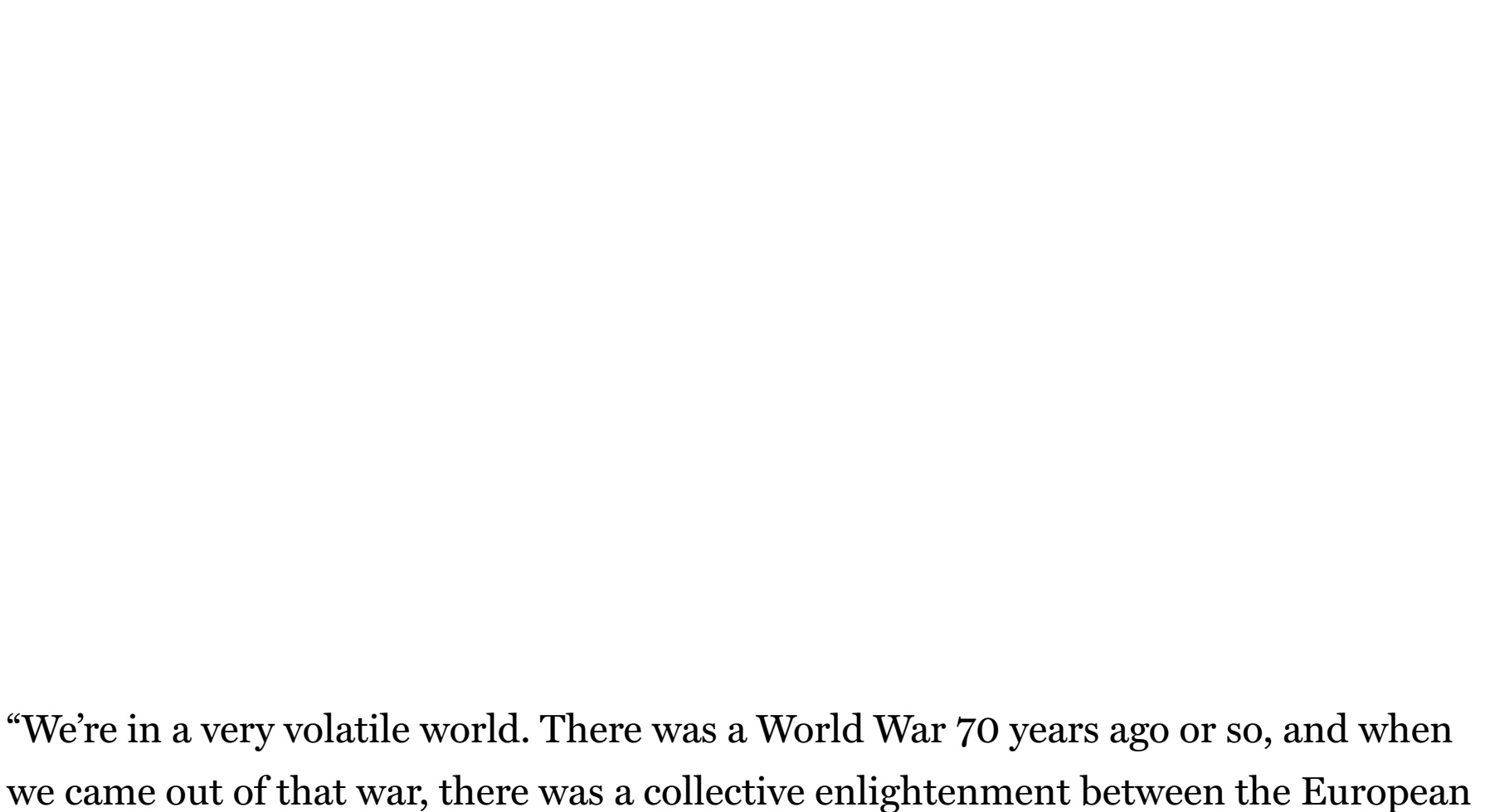
SPONSORED

"Acerbic comedy is as enjoyable as giving the finger to somebody—ultimately it doesn't make you feel better”"

“Stan Laurel was obsessive about getting the comedy right and I can be like that with my own stuff, being a perfectionist. I'd rather destroy something and have no one ever see it than do something that's just acceptable. And I think he was like that as well. In a way, that sometimes came before other stuff in his life. I've sometimes done that in such a way that hasn't been entirely healthy for me, for my personal life. But that was in the past. I feel like I'm in a pretty good place now.”

“I'm also not quite as disastrous as him, personally,” he chuckles. “I think he was married about seven times—I was only married once. But there are echoes of me in all the characters I play. People look at me and they go, ‘Oh, you're a bit like Alan Partridge’, and I say, ‘Well, that's inevitable.’ ”

In other ways, however, he couldn't be more different from his most famous character. As opposed to Partridge, who, according to Coogan, almost certainly voted for Brexit, the actor himself has been a vocal opponent of Britain leaving the EU, and our conversation inevitably turns in that direction.



“We're in a very volatile world. There was a World War 70 years ago or so, and when we came out of that war, there was a collective enlightenment between the European nations which was a global force for good. And if you fracture that and break it up, then what are we?” This is the first time in the conversation that Steve sits up straight, his face agitated and his voice raised.

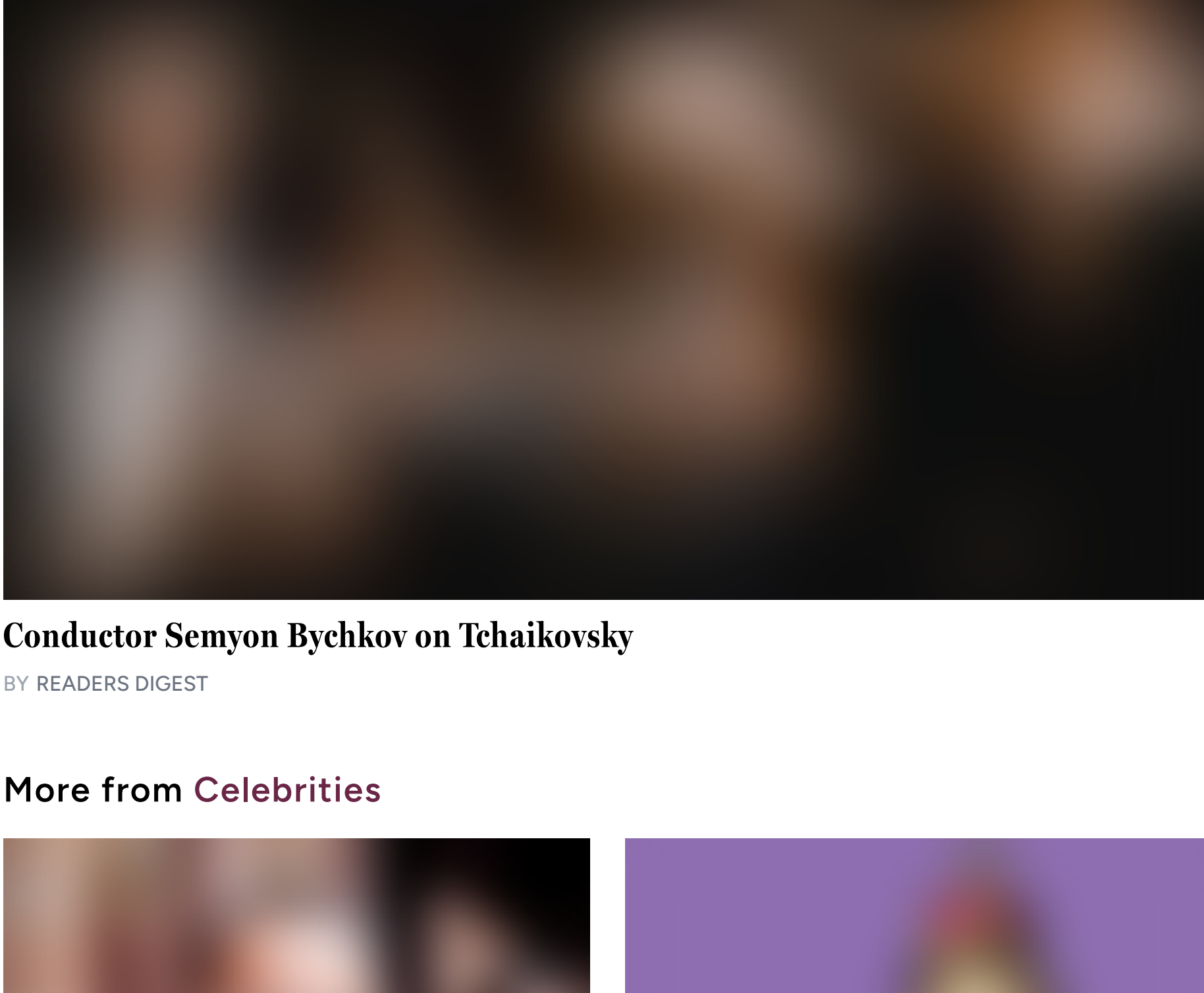
"Brexit is backward-looking, regressive and insular—philistinism of the worst kind"

“I think there's a romantic notion of Britain held by people who have this misty-eyed view that we're still somehow an empire or a world power. But we're not anymore. We're a small country. If we're to have any kind of influence, we need to be a part of this greater cultural force in the world. And that means being part of the EU—shared culture, shared traditions, shared values, that go back a thousand years and more. And to me, that's what's worth preserving. [Brexit] is backward-looking, regressive and insular—philistinism of the worst kind. It's an unholy alliance between romantic delusional fascists and ignorant people who think that you can do one thing and it'll fix everything.” I hold my breath, waiting for a continuation of this fervent speech, but instead, Steve says, “That was good, wasn't it?” and laughs. We get up to say our goodbyes and right before I leave, he takes a closer look at my hair and curiously strokes the shaved bit on the side. “Oh, you've got this bit shaved off? Does it grow back?” he asks. “Well, yeah, it's human hair.” I reply, and we both laugh. I leave the hotel with a smile on my face, happy in the knowledge that the Steve Coogan I met turned out to be everything I didn't expect him to be: down to earth, polite and kind. And he touched my hair.

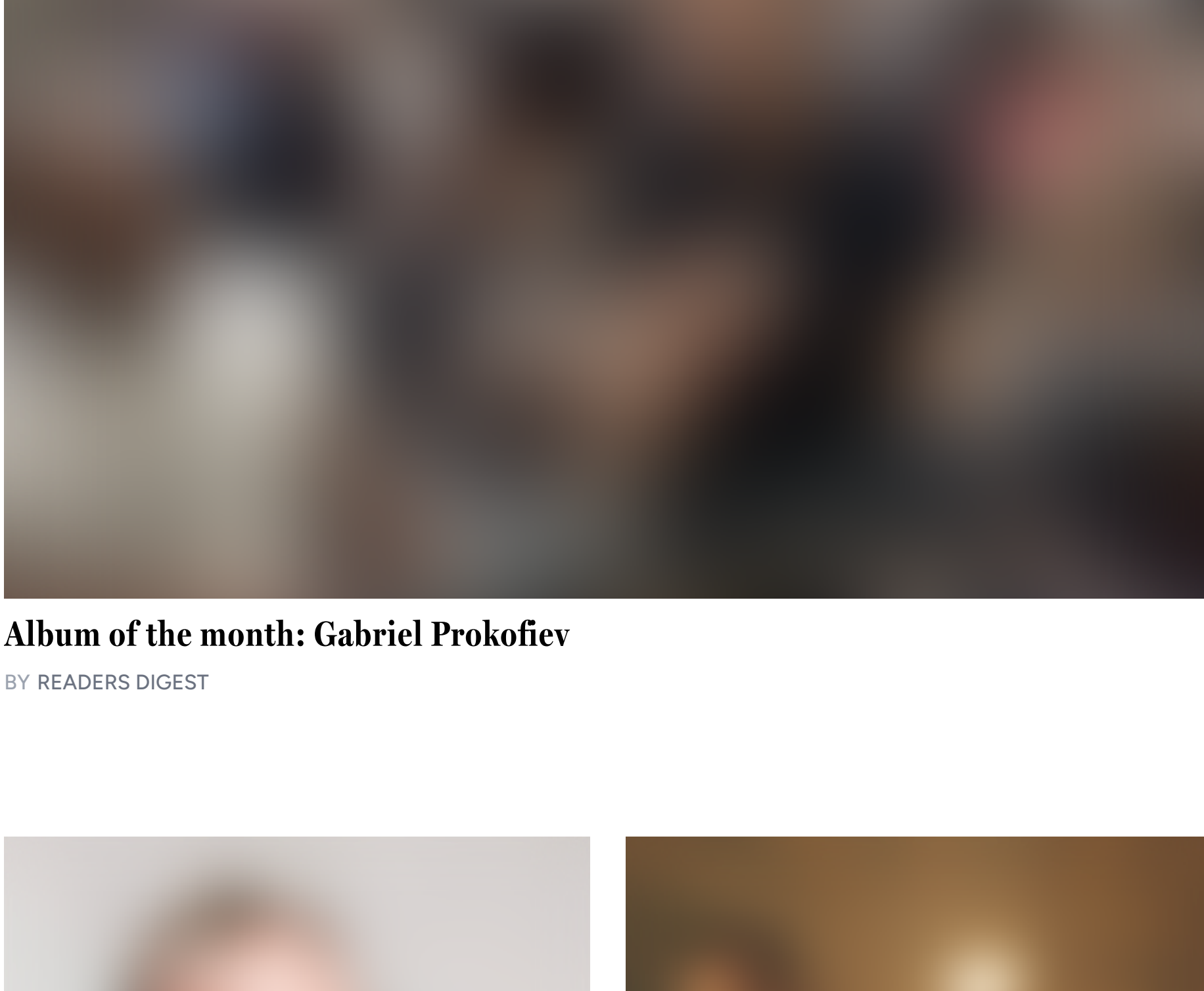
SPONSORED

This post contains affiliate links, so we may earn a small commission when you make a purchase through links on our site at no additional cost to you. Read our [disclaimer](#).

Up Next

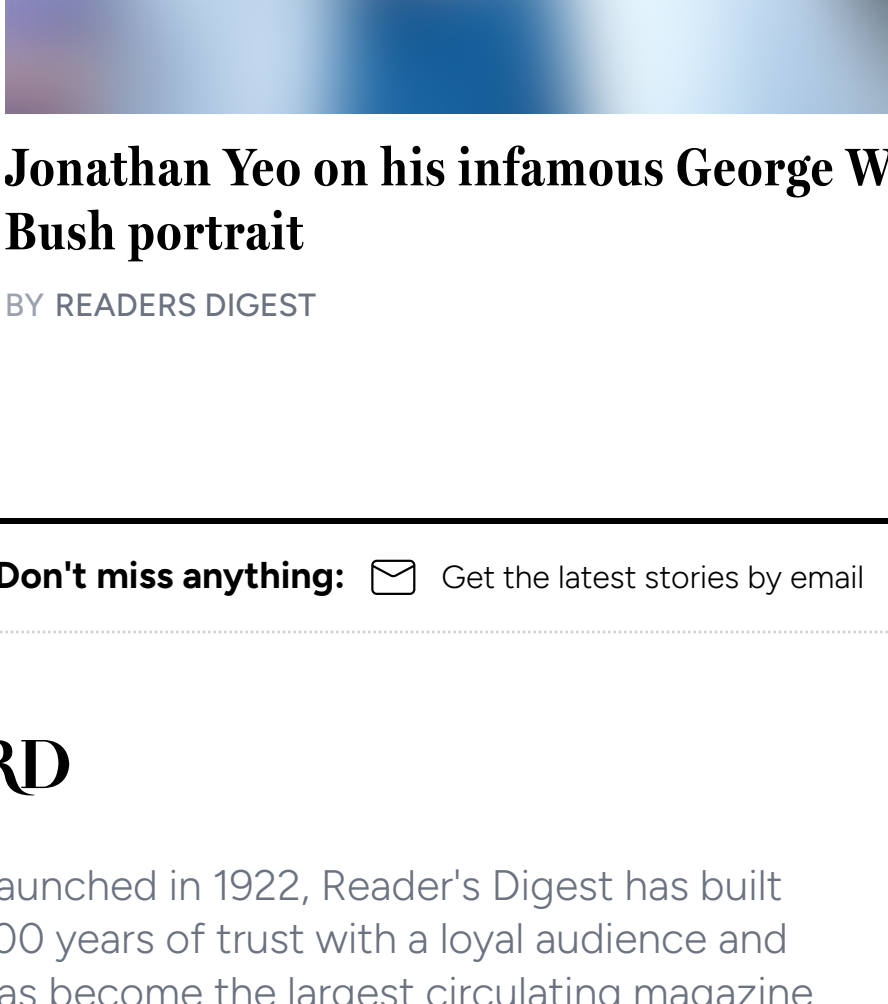


Conductor Semyon Bychkov on Tchaikovsky
BY READERS DIGEST



Album of the month: Gabriel Prokofiev
BY READERS DIGEST

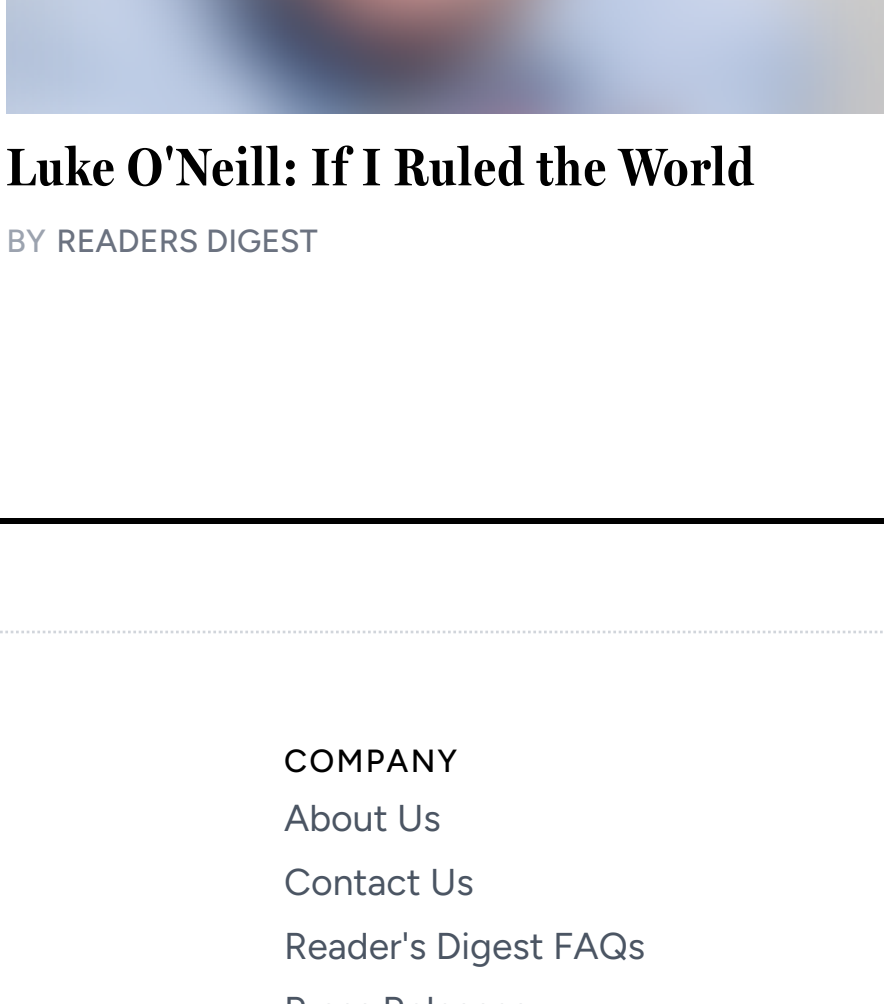
More from Celebrities



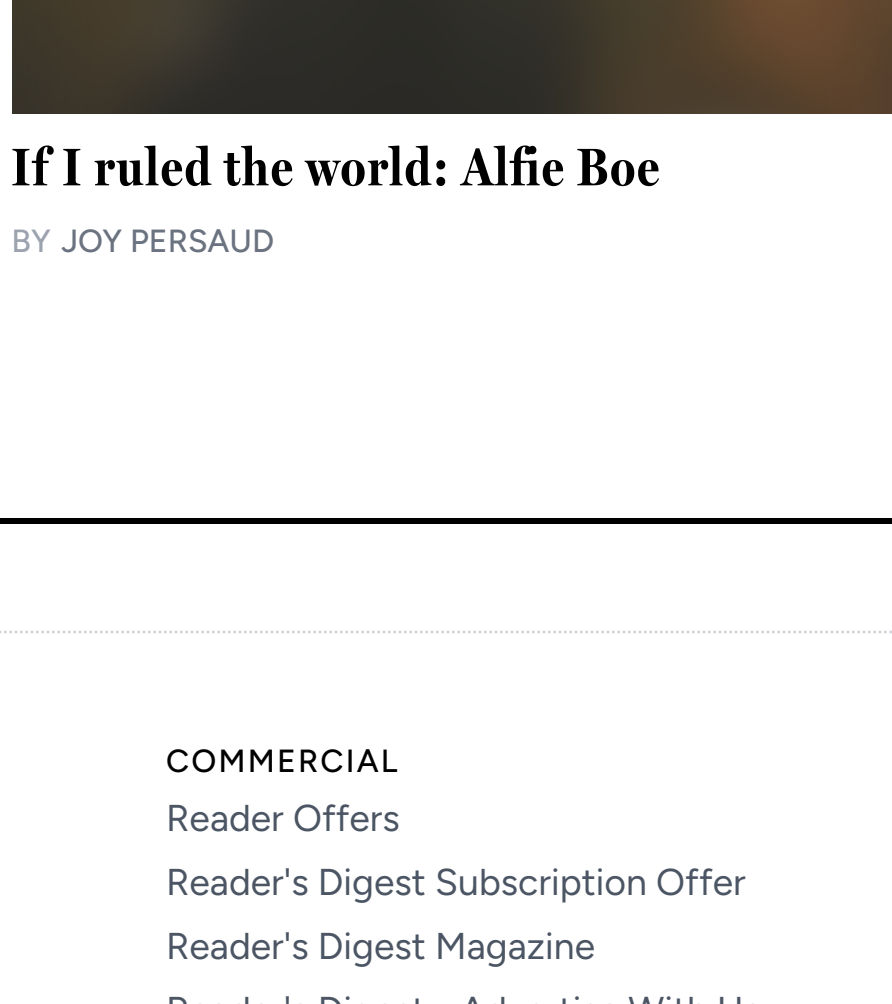
Jonathan Yeo on his infamous George W Bush portrait
BY READERS DIGEST



Jo Pavey: If I ruled the world
BY CAROLINE HUTTON



Luke O'Neill: If I Ruled the World
BY READERS DIGEST



If I ruled the world: Alfie Boe
BY JOY PERSAUD