

Diego Incertis

Dan Curzon meets the Spaniard who's rising to the top of the British orchestral scene



Fact File

Full Name: Diego Incertis Sánchez

Instrument: Alexander 103 in gold brass

Horn hero: My first teacher, Carlos Balaguer

Favourite piece to play: Shostakovich *Symphony No.7*

Piece you never want to play again: Berlioz *Symphonie Fantastique*

Hobbies: Baking bread, yoga, swimming

Job if not a horn player: Baker or airline pilot

Favourite Tuckwell recording: Strauss *Capriccio "Letzte Szene: Introduction"* Royal Philharmonic Orchestra/Ashkenazy

It's a mild evening in the Southbank Centre as I sit down to chat with one of the new bright, shining lights of the music world. In just a short space of time Diego Incertis has made giant strides in the professional orchestral scene of Britain, playing principal horn with the London Symphony Orchestra, Philharmonia, London Philharmonic Orchestra and many others as well as winning the third horn chair with the Philharmonia, at the age of only 22.

In the BBC Proms of 2019, Diego took part in a concert that won't be soon forgotten by anyone that heard it. As most readers will know, the entire opening of Bruckner's fourth symphony is comprised of incredibly subtle string playing and a luxurious horn solo, that even previous to this concert has attained an infamy amongst horn players, amateur and professional alike. During the start of this piece, that was broadcast live to the nation via the radio, a drunk audience member

caused such a disturbance that the piece had to be restarted and the solo played again from the beginning. Diego sat on principal horn for this infamous moment in musical history, in which I had the pleasure of bumping him, and so got to hear and be part of this quite unbelievable moment. More on that later.

Diego left his home in Valladolid at 17 to start his studies in Madrid under the esteemed tutelage of Rodolfo Epelde and a little known horn player called Radovan Vlatković at the Reina Sofia School of Music. After the first two years of his bachelors, he made the bold decision to transfer to the Royal College of Music in London to complete the rest of his education. At the RCM he studied under the tutelage of Jeff Bryant, Timothy Jones and Nigel Black - not a bad list of teachers to have! We start this interview however with Radovan Vlatković, a world-renowned soloist and commonly thought of as one of the best French horn players of all time.

Dan: Did Radovan have a big influence on you?

Diego: Of course. Radovan would come once a month for a whole week, during which all of us would have three one-to-one lessons. We would spend the rest of the month preparing repertoire and studying technical things with Rodolfo. To fill three one-to-one lessons wasn't easy so we covered so much music in preparation which worked well

for us. Obviously we picked up musical and technical things from both of them, Radovan would focus on the music, mainly. Just to hear him play was incredible but he knows so much about life as well, away from the horn. He has taught at the conservatoire in Madrid for around 20 years. Every month we had to perform a 15- to 20-minute recital.

Dan: Amazing! Alberto Escribano Menéndez (Principal Horn, BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra) has also come over to England from the same place. Is there something special about coming to England from Madrid as a Spanish horn player?



Diego: I don't think there's just one reason but there is a really heavy American and also French influence in Spain. Most Spanish will look to Germany for the way to play the horn as there are so many jobs out there; this doesn't mean that Spanish playing is definitely German however. There have been quite a few of us who

have come to study in England but then returned to Spain. Possibly it comes down to when you hear Radovan play: it opens your eyes to discover other ways of playing, not just the fairly bright German sound which is the only sound most people have easy access to. So it opens your eyes especially to the British horn sound, which isn't just a "one size fits all".

Dan: Why did you choose the RCM?

Diego: Five months after I started in Madrid, Nigel Black (Principal Horn, Philharmonia) came to do a masterclass which was incredible. I remember no one in the class had ever listened to the Philharmonia or heard Nigel play. Everyone was so surprised that you could play the horn like that! It's bad because we all should know - we should have the knowledge of all the different ways to sound, and play, the horn around the world.

Also, at the time I was making my decision, there were lots of job openings in Britain - not just principal positions - so I started doing auditions. I felt I wanted to do some playing outside the practice room, like auditions, and the trial process that happens in the UK was greatly appealing. I would get actual orchestral experience if I played well enough. So at the beginning of my third year I had a choice of the Academy or College and living in London and freelancing really appealed. Also I didn't want to learn German...

Dan: When you came over, was winning a job with the Philharmonia a goal for you?

Diego: I originally auditioned for the principal job in 2017 and had seen them play live in Madrid - *Daphnis and Chloe* with Esa-Pekka Salonen, earlier that year. As soon as I saw that job I definitely wanted to apply for it!



Dan: Has the Philharmonia changed the way you play the horn?

Diego: Yes. My mouthpiece had to change and teachers in England obviously teach a British way of playing which is more flexible than most other places. The horn you play doesn't matter as much for instance. Nothing changed automatically but I wanted to play in England.

Dan: So, Bruckner... It's the BBC Proms; Salonen conducting Bruckner's fourth symphony; sold out Albert Hall; on trial for Principal Horn of the Philharmonia. First half comes and goes - what's going through your brain?

Diego: My process was to think about playing well the whole week, not just the concert, so that my mindset wouldn't be that different when it came to that moment. I was able to just concentrate on making a nice sound and enjoying

myself. It's best not to think too much as the more you think, the worse it is.

Dan: That makes a lot of sense. So we start the piece and I think that something was going on before you'd even started the solo.

Diego: In the second bar I heard something, but I'm just focusing on what I've got to do. It was only listening back to the recording that I heard what was actually happening. It got louder and louder, this guy in the audience is swearing his head off and we got to bar 33, towards the end of the whole solo, and Salonen turns around and stops the orchestra. I mean it's not something that anyone wants to happen.

Everyone hoped it would die down - it was unbearable. Salonen was so angry! He stopped, looked at the audience and waited till the guy was escorted out, at which point everyone started clapping. He turned around, waited for silence and then off we went again.

I remember I was just laughing inside, I couldn't believe it was happening! I then turned to you at the end of the first section.

Dan: You looked at me and started laughing! I remember you were just like "what the hell just happened??" But it wasn't anger, it was just funny!

Diego: It was so surreal. It's not a common thing that a disturbance is so strong it stops a performance but of all the times it could have happened in over 80 Proms! Right until the end of the whole piece I was still in disbelief.

Dan: I remember reading a review the next day and the writer said how the solo was even better the second time around. It was great the first time but impeccable the second time and he was right! How did you have the mental fortitude to do it again?

Diego: You don't think about it. It's just, *OK, I have to do it again.* The adrenaline didn't actually kick

in at the end of the first time and I was able to just have the simple thought, *OK, play it again.*

Dan: It was genuinely amazing! Tonight, however, Richard Watkins is playing the Britten *Serenade* and a new Turnage concerto. What else is ahead?

Diego: Richard sounds absolutely amazing, it's brilliant to hear him. Also we have *Till Eulenspiegel* to play as well. The Turnage is great - so well written and the way he has used all the horns, orchestral and the soloist, is really interesting. I think non horn players will really like it as well.

Next Tuesday we are off to Japan with Esa-Pekka for a tour of *The Firebird*, *Rite of Spring* and Mahler's *Symphony No. 9* among others. It should be a really great tour, especially as Stravinsky and Mahler are such core composers for the Philharmonia - the orchestra plays them so well. And hopefully we won't have to restart any pieces! **DC**



Philharmonia horn section
(L to R) Carsten Williams, Diego Incertis, Kira Doherty, Nigel Black