

Sarah Willis MBE



When the world's most recognisable horn player is awarded an MBE in the Queen's honours, it's time to celebrate the selfless work and dedication of one of Britain's finest exports. After rising to fame as the first female member of the Berlin Philharmonic's brass section, she has used her platform to spread her love of music and the horn around the globe. The BHS sent our very own horn player-turned-communicator and educator, **Tom Redmond**, to find out more about this remarkable woman.

The last time you were interviewed for this fine journal was just after you had joined the Berlin Philharmonic which was...?

20 years ago. I only know that because on the *Mozart y Mambo* tour this summer there was quite a lot of press and one of the articles said "Sarah Willis, horn player with the Berlin Philharmonic for 20 years". How on earth could that happen?! I still feel like the new girl.

I remember reading about it in this very magazine with pictures of your cockatoos!

Though you're pretty much back to normal in Berlin, it can't go unmentioned that in the depths of lockdown you kept a lot of people sane with your daily hangouts with Stefan [Dohr, Principal Horn of the Berlin Philharmonic], talking about horn playing and cooking. I suppose one of the things that has really developed over the last few years is how you have reached a wider audience. Where did that come from? How did the Horn Hangouts begin?

What started me off on this journey of communicating my passion for classical music was being part of the YouTube Symphony Orchestra in Sydney in 2011 when I was invited there as a coach. I was actually very lucky because they asked Stefan first (they always ask Stefan first!). He looked at it and said it's too far and said this is more your thing, Sarah, you go. I was so grateful that I did because this was something completely new. I met young people from all over the world and they all knew that the Digital Concert Hall [Berlin Philharmonic's online platform] had just started. Talking to them, I realised how important the digital world had become and how grateful these people were, who don't have access to the Berlin Philharmonic live, to have this, and suddenly something inside me went "Bing!". I thought, I am so privileged to live in a city where there are good teachers, great concerts, good study possibilities, great libraries and internet, and there are all these people here who don't have that. They will put an antenna on the top of their house in the middle of the Amazon jungle to get good internet for a concert. This was all very new and I felt I had to do something. I had to share what I do; it was literally a desire to share and this turned into a mission and a passion and although it kills me at times (physically, mentally and financially) it is something that seems to have grown into some sort of Empire. Empire is probably a silly word for it...

Surrounded by the flags as you are, it doesn't seem that silly [Sarah has a fine display of Union Jacks behind her, and a small statue of the Queen!]

The hangouts have shown people what is possible, and they've inspired countless others to do similar things. They've opened up a conversation that wasn't there before. You've humanised so many musicians that people idolise and look up to but knew little about.

It was this feeling of seeing these young people so interested in the person playing the music, not just that Mozart wrote great symphonies and the Berlin Philharmonic played it, but they wanted to know about us as people and that is the industry

these days; people find musicians they idolise and then find out about what they do and what their passions and interests are. Then they will go to a concert – that way around. In the old days you used to go to a concert, see someone you find interesting then maybe talk to them, but these days it seems to be the other way around. So to be told that people liked what I was doing and were watching it, I felt it was very easy to share a lot of that. Of course, there is sharing and *sharing*, and I made very strict rules for myself at the beginning about what I would share and what I wouldn't. The best thing about this communication journey has been to realise that we have created this community which has branched out into all instruments; but we started in the horns! We started it, we are proud to be horn players, we did "Bells Up". I get photos of "Bells Up" from all over the world and whenever I get one I am incredibly happy and proud because I see that other people are happy to be horn nerds as well.

It is exactly that! You've made everyone proud to be a geek!

It wasn't like that before. You didn't talk about it. We were secret horn anoraks. You weren't allowed to talk about the fact that maybe you got nervous – you just didn't do that. You didn't talk about mouthpieces or hand positions. It's OK and good to talk about all that and I see from the Horn Hangouts that there are masses of people out there who like to do the same. That is a really important thing because if you take this fear and this mystery away, you realise that we are all in the same boat. Just because I am in the Berlin Phil does not mean that I don't get nervous before a concert – I get more nervous before concerts because of that – but nobody talked to me about that before. It's little things like that which I think have made us proud to be horn players, proud to be these nerds and to realise how



Photo: Sebastian Haenel

important it is to find out about horn players from other countries. Just keeping our interests open, that has been this amazing journey.

The Queen thinks it's a brilliant idea too. You must be immensely proud to have received an MBE in the Birthday Honours.

Yes! I remember the moment I got the phone call. I was in this room, standing up and I answered the telephone and this very posh voice said, "This is the British Embassy in Berlin calling on behalf of the Consulate." I thought, what have I done now? Has he found out that I hate Brexit and I was a bit worried because I have been very vocal about the fact that I thought it was a terrible idea – like all the ex-pats I know. I really thought I was going to get told off for something. He asked me if I was sitting down and I said, "No, but I will". So I sat down and he said that I had been awarded an MBE and my legs started shaking. I asked, "What for?" and he said for services to charity and for the promotion of classical music. I found that really nice because though we're not a charity as such, I feel I'm in such a privileged position to have a job with a salary so why shouldn't I put on things like Horn Hangouts? I never thought that anyone would want to award me for it. He said I wasn't allowed to tell anyone – so I called my mum immediately! My mum is even more proud than I am. It is such a huge honour and you can't really explain to someone who is not British what that means for us.

My horn section here now call me *Madam* and *Your Majesty* and when it was announced all of them got down on their knees – so there are a lot of jokes about it and I don't feel that anyone can really understand what it means to us to be awarded this, but it means everything.

I was born in America. Dad was Australian and a naturalised American but Mum is British and wherever we were in the world we were brought up British. So I have always felt that England is where I came from even though we didn't move there until I was 13. For me, I started learning the horn there – I was taught by Anthony Grey who was the most incredible

musician, and then moved to the Guildhall [School of Music and Drama] and had the most amazing teachers. So when this happened with the MBE I was so proud for the British horn world it was like something for us – the horn being recognised. It made me really want to come back and do more for the BHS.

Well, I shall bow and say congratulations! I just want to re-wind to something that you have alluded to: that everything you have done in terms of sharing, in opening up this conversation is completely self-driven, both in terms of motivation and financial commitment. You do this out of the goodness of your soul. That is remarkable and obviously worthy of a medallion from the Queen. I suppose there is nothing you can say to that but on behalf of the horn world... Thank you.

That is so sweet, but it is also the fact that I feel that we have built this community and I don't want to walk away from it. I must say though that building it is one thing, but keeping it going is another thing and of course I have had to have help along the way. Alexander were very generous and they sponsor part of the Horn Hangouts every year which is really great because without them I couldn't keep doing this. If you buy a T-shirt or a polishing cloth or a key chain, that goes towards supporting the Horn Hangout – so the community do support as well. Yes, I give my time and passion and money but it is really less about the money – the other things are more draining; the time and creation, because as you know the amount of time that goes into these things is vast.

It's very difficult to come out of COVID and know where to go with the Horn Hangouts and I would love to hear from members of the British Horn Society about what they would wish for, because everybody has interviewed everybody about everything, everywhere at every time of day with every form of interaction; everything the Horn Hangouts used to do exclusively. We really were the first people to do these chats. I just wonder where to go from here because there have been so many Zoom talks nobody can even see them anymore! I think we have to get back to the personal, live events and make those into

Horn Hangouts rather than continue doing these interviews online. I don't know. We need some more horn flashmobs!

Let's talk about your other big lockdown project: *Mozart y Mambo*

Well that was another typical Sarah thing because again what horn player doesn't want to record the Mozart horn concertos? I didn't want to do it like everybody else. Of course, I am grateful for every recording that I have heard, but I didn't want to do all four concertos and the *Concert Rondo*. I wanted to do it a little differently and this crazy idea came when I was visiting Cuba for a masterclass. I met these horn players that I didn't even know existed. I realised the unbelievable musicality they had and the potential



Cooking with Stefan Dohr



Sarah in conversation with Tom Redmond about her MBE

they also have because they play on such terrible instruments. You know, how good could they be if they played on decent instruments? You know how you go to a place and suddenly you feel that you are at home? That's what happened to me in Cuba! I just fell in love with these people. The way they make music, the way they move, the way they talk. The whole atmosphere in Havana, it was just incredibly intoxicating.

The idea came having heard their orchestra play, then seeing a statue of Mozart in the middle of Havana and then I was like, "tick, tick, tick" – maybe I could record the Mozart horn concertos here? Then I was like, "nah let's turn it into something different!" I had this piece composed for me, "Rondo alla Mambo", and things just escalated. We were lucky because we recorded it in January 2020 but just to make life more difficult, I managed to get a TV company to come and film a live concert. I haven't been a soloist for 20 years and it is really not my thing – playing solo. People don't believe me when I say that, but I get too nervous for that and I would rather leave it to other people. I am much happier in the orchestra, but I knew that to get this project out into the world it needed me to do something unusual and that was for me to be a soloist.

So there was a lot of pressure but it really has been the project of my life. I get really emotional talking and thinking about it, especially after the tour we just had in Germany, because these musicians are incredible and they have gone back to such hardships and that breaks my heart. The whole thing was recorded in January 2020 and on the plane on the way back home I opened a newspaper and read about this weird virus. I got home, then... the world closed down! We edited it all remotely, the editor and the cutter never met in person, and then it came out in July. It was a time when the world just needed something like that. You've seen how happy everybody is on the streets of Havana: dancing, singing and playing to an incredibly high standard as well. The world went crazy for it! It was incredible. And they still are. We went back onto the best-seller list after the tour. It just makes me so happy and proud because it took so many people to make it work. I just came up with this crazy idea and pushed and pushed until someone said, OK we will do it!

Yes the video – moving, dancing, playing in the street. It captures the spirit and again highlights the passion you throw into everything!

The really amazing thing was that a French horn suddenly went viral in a good way, not in a picture as a urinal or toilet or something! We had something like eight million views in three weeks. It went into the Latin charts, into the German pop charts and a lot of people had no idea what this instrument was. It went into all of these charts not because it was Mozart horn concertos but because of the Mambo element, but whoever downloaded the album had to listen to a Mozart horn concerto as well. A lot of people wrote to me (from both sides). The classical people wrote to say they loved it and great Mozart! The people who came from the Latin world were like, this instrument is so beautiful. So I think it did a great job in showing the world what a cool instrument the horn is – but then of course we knew that already!

After such a success, should we expect a second album?

Well funny you should mention that. My original plan was to record the Mozart horn concertos in different countries, with different styles of music, but we have realised through *Mozart y Mambo* and through my connection with this orchestra who I literally love, there is another reason why this has been so successful. I am not a regular soloist; they are not regular world stars. We support each other so much; when I got on the stage I felt that they were stroking me on the shoulder. I felt so lifted and so supported and on the tour the audience said that they could see it and feel it. I love these people and I am not done with Cuba yet. We still have Mozart 1, 2 and 4 and the little fragments if I can get hold of the orchestral parts for that. I don't have children so I feel very strongly that when I leave this world I want to leave something good behind. I want to have made a difference and left some good things so I am also having something composed...

We shall wait with bated breath. Thank you so much for talking to us and for all that you do. TR

To join the British Horn Society and receive three copies of *The Horn Player* each year as well as exclusive digital content, please visit:

www.british-horn.org