

Elspeth Dutch



The **BHS** would like to congratulate **Elspeth Dutch** on reaching 20 years as Principal Horn of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra. In recognition of this, we sent her childhood teacher and fellow horn tutor at the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire, **Simon de Souza**, to chat to her about reaching this milestone.

Well Elspeth, here we are, in a teaching room at RBC grabbing lunch between students and reflecting on your 20 years as Principal Horn of the CBSO [Official title: Section leader horn]. I can vividly recall you phoning me to tell me you'd been offered the job. How does it feel to find you've been in it for so long?

I had a conversation with a friend from Guildhall who joined CBSO at roughly the same time as me and we were remembering how we looked at all the people in the orchestra who'd clearly been here for ages. We never thought we'd be here that

long, but here we both are! I don't think the concept of 20 years really meant much to me then as I was only 22, and essentially it was a lifetime.

And you were offered trials for CBSO and also the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic on the same day, and while you were still at college?

Yes, and I did the trials for both which was tricky fitting them in around my final term at Guildhall, although fortunately it was a relatively quiet time at college and Peter Gane, then Head

of Brass, was very helpful in getting me time off things to allow me to do the trials. And of course this was before IMSLP so he very kindly found me copies of all the orchestral excerpts that I needed.

Well of course, while you still seem very young to me, one of the things about you being in the job for 20 years is the way in which the world has changed and resources like IMSLP, YouTube and Spotify have made that kind of reference so much simpler – which is why it's sometimes frustrating when our mutual students don't do their research!

Yes, we had to wait for the librarian to post you hard copies of the excerpts; now you just get it on your phone instantly!

And how did the trials go?

The CBSO offered me a Prom which turned out to be the day after my final recital which was a good thing in a way because I couldn't really get too stressed about either! And then in the Prom we had to play Nielsen *Symphony No. 5* (which isn't a light blow!) and it was strange because none of the regular section were on because they were playing a concerto for four horns by Julian Anderson called *Imagin'd Corners*, so I was also leading a section of strangers.

In 20 years in the same job you've obviously seen a lot of changes in the orchestra and the way it operates, presumably?

Well I'm not very good at noticing contractual changes and things like that – my colleague Mark Phillips is great at that side of things – but the orchestra has certainly grown and developed in that time and feels great these days – the strings in particular. I still enjoy playing with other orchestras when I'm offered it, but the CBSO feels like home.

Something that will be interesting to many of our readers is what your experience of holding down a job like Principal Horn of the CBSO while being a mother to two delightful young girls has been?

I suppose I don't have any other experience to measure it against, so it seems quite normal to me, but having a very capable, supportive husband has helped tremendously. Andy's a school teacher so his hours are quite regular and he's been able to be there for the evenings and weekends and holidays, which is a huge help. And grandparents too. When the girls were little I obviously prioritised them and it was quite hard but the orchestra were very supportive. It also meant that I never got too stressed at work because there was always some drama with the girls so coming in to play seemed at times a bit like a rest – I got to sit down for a change, and even go to the toilet by myself, which seemed like a luxury! The children were always good

about me practising at home. Even when they were dinky, I'd just put them in a corner with some toys and play away and they got used to it. Also, because I'd already been in the job ten years before I had my first child I felt I'd seen so much of the repertoire that there weren't too many surprises and I felt in control of the job. The orchestra were also very accommodating about touring, so I didn't do any long tours until quite recently, which made a big difference.

Do you think being in the orchestra helped, rather than if you'd been a freelancer, where, although you have theoretically total flexibility, in reality you're always concerned to keep your name out there and not have people saying, "Oh, she's not available because she's having babies"?

Oh, yes, and another thing that helps is that we now get the schedule a long way in advance which makes planning childcare and arrangements so much more straightforward. Being really organised has been key though, and not getting too stressed about anything. Getting home late after concerts if the girls got up in the night wasn't always easy, and being pregnant and playing was very hard as I suffered quite a lot with sickness, but generally I found my limits as to how much I could handle, and made it work.

You've seen personnel changes in the orchestra and also of course in the horn section. Would it be fair to say you're not a great fan of the whole audition process and your part in it?

I do find it stressful because I hate sitting in judgment. All these people come and play and you're thinking "oh, that wasn't quite right" or "that didn't sound great", and then you think "but what would I sound like?"! Many people do a great job but they're just not quite right, for whatever reason, and although it feels very picky we've got to find the right player to make the section work. And, having had some wonderful players in the section in the past, I know how it should feel and sound to me. I also find trials quite stressful because I find it hard doing my own job and concentrating on my own playing whilst also constantly listening to and evaluating the trialist.



Elspeth aged 9

20 years is a lot of concerts and a huge amount of repertoire. Are there any real standout performances for you?

When I was on trial, we went to the Lucerne Festival with Sir Simon Rattle doing *Ein Heldenleben*. I've probably been back ten times since, but this just felt like such an event, with such a beautiful hall and right by the lake. Then, at the end of the concert, Rattle gave me the flowers that he'd been presented with, and I thought "oh, this could really help my cause!" So that's a definite standout.

There were lots of concerts and recordings with Sakari Oramo which were always really enjoyable because he gave a great feeling of security but also allowed a lot of freedom to do your own thing. And there were some really exciting concerts and tours with Andris Nelsons. We did a lot of the really big repertoire – a Mahler cycle, a Bruckner cycle, a Tchaikovsky cycle – and also quite a lot of semi-staged operas which you don't necessarily expect to play in a symphony orchestra. That has continued with Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla because she loves opera too. We also did a lot of recording with Andris, including lots of Strauss, the tone poems and the *Alpine Symphony* and so on.

Something that I think helped me too was that in my first year in the job I did all the "fives": Mahler *Symphony No. 5*, Shostakovich *Symphony No. 5* and Tchaikovsky *Symphony No. 5*, one after the other. I didn't really realise at the time that these were such a big deal and so was able to be quite relaxed about my

approach to them.

You've done quite a number of solos with the orchestra?

Yes, lots, and I've got one coming up which I'm very excited about next summer: the Britten *Serenade* with Ian Bostridge. I remember hearing him sing it with David Pyatt when I was at Guildhall and being blown away by his voice and expression, so when the orchestra manager told me about this concert and asked if I was alright with it being Ian Bostridge I was just bowled over! Other than that, I've done lots of performances of Strauss *Horn Concerto No. 1* on tour with Sakari and that was a great memory, playing in so many different places. The fanciest one was in St Moritz and I got to stay in the luxury hotel where Sakari was staying and it was the poshest place I've ever stayed in the world; I got all my friends to come and get ready in my enormous room before the concert! It's a piece I love playing and I feel it really suits me. I also really enjoyed doing the Schumann *Konzertstück*, being out front with the rest of the section.

I'd also like to do more chamber music which we certainly have the possibility of with our CBSO Centre Stage series which is curated by the players themselves. I used to do more of that before the children came along and I'm starting to do more of that now; it's such a different way of playing.

Do you feel your playing has changed, or your approach to it?

Definitely. I feel my stamina and strength have certainly grown and I'm much more confident about my ability to get through things. Programmes that I used to think I might need more help with I know I can manage nowadays. I sometimes feel a bit under par in dress rehearsals and Martin Wright, our bumper, usually just tells me I need to go and have a big chocolate milkshake! That and eating properly before playing, so as to have the right level of energy, is so important. Some people don't like to, but I just have to for the energy levels!

And do you think your sound has changed?

Well, you should probably tell me since you remember my sound all the way back to when I was 9! But I think it's probably bigger and fuller.

And still on the same horn?

Still the same Paxman 20M that I got when I was learning with you at school and always will be. Maybe I'm a bit superstitious but I just don't want to get another one. It makes a sound that I like and it's been with me through so much. Occasionally I've tried someone else's horn – Mike Kidd (ex-CBSO 2nd horn) and I swapped horns one day and even though they were nominally the same make and model we each hated the other's instrument! I love the balance and weight of it in my hands. It's got a fixed bell so some people are surprised I don't get the bell chopped, but I worry that it might change the sound, and as the orchestra transports my horn for me most of the time the advantages of a smaller case aren't really so important for me. I just love my horn and feel rather loyal to it. Andy Clennell has serviced it a couple of times. I explained that I'd had it since I was 17 and



Elspeth after her last lesson with Simon as a schoolgirl in his back garden

he told me that if everybody looked after their horns as well as I did then he'd be out of a job! In theory, it should last me my whole career.

And the same mouthpiece?

Since the second year of Guildhall. I played the Paxman 4B you started me on and then at college Hugh Seenan said I needed a bigger one and gave me a list of mouthpieces to try. But when I went into Paxmans they only had one from his list in stock and I quite liked it so I bought that, and I may have told Hugh that I'd tried them all and liked this one best!

And do you know what it is? Because I remember you ringing me up one day and asking me what mouthpiece you played on and of course at that point I actually didn't know!

Ha ha! Yes, these days I do: it's a PHC 22A with an AS rim. The one thing I have changed subsequently is that after about five years in the job my lips reacted to the nickel silver and Pete Currie, my 2nd horn at the time, suggested I change to a gold-plated rim, and that sorted the problem out instantly. I've actually got three identical ones and every so often I get the rims re-plated.

So in total you've actually only really played four horns in your horn-playing life?

Yes! The old silver-plated Hawkes piston horn you lent me to

start on which came out of its ancient funny leather case, then a Hoyer double, a Yamaha 667 and finally the Paxman. I did use the orchestra's Alexander alto for the *Konzertstück* but I really didn't like it and we're actually in the process of getting a different descant for the section to use.

And after 20 years you're still enjoying the job?

Oh, yes. I still love the music and the tunes and I have supportive colleagues around me.

But you've always had a very straightforward approach to it?

I think so. Obviously there are times when I get a bit more nervous, but I just enjoy the music and the tunes I get to play. Sometimes, and I'm sure this comes from you, if I am feeling a bit more anxious I just think about singing. I simply imagine a big neon sign above my head saying "Sing!" and then I just relax and everything just becomes more natural. You have to breathe well to sing and that's the same for the horn. Perhaps that's why I don't want to get too geeky about horns and mouthpieces and the mechanics of horn playing but just try to keep it simple!

Well, it seems to be a remarkably successful approach so thank you for chatting and I look forward to another 20 years of your career. Maybe then they can wheel me out in my bath chair and we'll have another chat about how the second half of your horn-playing life has gone! Sds

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