

# Ben Hulme



One of the few advantages of having a vacancy in a section is that the members are often some of the first professionals to meet each new generation of exciting young musicians. **Ben Hulme** was one such player, debuting with the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra in 2018 where he first met **Ed Lockwood**. The Co-editor of *The Horn Player* caught up with Ben to chat about his career so far, and life with the BBC Philharmonic and beyond.

**What drew you to the horn and who was your first teacher?**

I started the horn when I was 7, but if I'm honest, I can't really remember how it all happened! I wanted to play a wind instrument so I could join the primary school Wind Band, but I wanted to play something bigger than a trumpet that wasn't a flute or clarinet either. My Dad taught music at a local school and knew that they had a single F horn that wasn't being used, so he brought it home for me to try. I remember getting it out of the case, blowing raspberries down it and finding it quite funny. Shortly after that, I began having weekly lessons with Janet Kent and knew the horn was for me!

**It sounds like you progressed very quickly because you then went to Chetham's School of Music (Chets)?**

Yes, that's right. It was still relatively early days playing-wise but I was very keen and was delighted when they offered me a place. One of my first memories at Chets was going to my audition and being given a tour of the school by a very friendly and enthusiastic horn player in the sixth form – Mike Kidd (Former 2<sup>nd</sup> horn of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra). I went there aged 10 and initially studied with Lizzie Davis, and later on had lessons with Julian Plummer too. I really loved the “all-inclusive” experience and endless opportunities that were

on offer, and alongside my horn lessons I had a brief stint on the cello, as well as studying the piano and latterly the organ too. I had a fantastic time there and it was great to go back last year to give a masterclass to the next generation of young horn players.

**I gather you were in the National Youth Orchestra at a good time, too?**

Yes, I was in the NYO from 2011-2013. It was a brilliant experience to play bigger repertoire in a massive orchestra and I mainly played low horn. We had a great section and great tutors (Jim Beck, John Ryan and Steve Bell) for both years and I certainly made some friends for life. It was such an amazing opportunity, and playing Messiaen's *Turangalila-Symphonic* at the Proms in 2012 was a particular highlight.

**Did you know by this point that you wanted to make your living as a horn player?**

I'm not too sure. I was obviously still enjoying playing and that was clearly enough to keep me going. Being at Chets, and being in the NYO, I was surrounded by lots of older players that I looked up to, so I saw lots of them going off to music college and thought it sounded like something I'd like to do too. I don't think I'd really thought much beyond that!

**You went to the Royal Academy of Music. Who were your teachers there and how did they help to guide you?**

I went to the RAM in 2015 and studied with Richard Watkins, Mike Thompson, Martin Owen, Katy Woolley, and Roger Montgomery. There was a real blend of approaches and I think that was really good for me. Over the four years, I suppose they all guided me in completely different ways and they each had aspects of my playing that they wanted to work on with me, but

somehow it felt homogenous. Inevitably, there were different opinions on where to breathe on the first page of Strauss's *Horn Concerto No. 2*, for example, but the overall musical and technical approaches seemed to come into one and I'm very grateful to all of them.

**You began working with us at the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra in your 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> year I think? Hopefully that was a good learning experience because you seemed to grow in confidence every week.**

Yes, I started coming into the BSO as guest principal in 2018, so that would have been the end of my 3<sup>rd</sup> year. I'd done a few bits of first horn in the Academy orchestra, but this was my first time working with a professional orchestra. I remember the first programme, which was the annual Benevolent Fund concert - Tchaikovsky's *Francesca da Rimini*, Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf*, and Beethoven's *Symphony No. 8*. I don't think I'll ever forget that feeling of imposter syndrome I had in the early days. I suppose the only way I felt able to deal with that was by being out there and doing it, but there's no doubt that the support and encouragement of the BSO section really helped me along too. You're right, it absolutely was an amazing learning experience and it's only thanks to you all for your patience that I got so much out of it.

**And then you got your job at the BBC Philharmonic (aged 23)! Tell us about your trial and working there.**

As with the BSO work I'd been doing, my trial at the BBC was certainly another steep learning curve. I suppose having only really worked in one professional orchestra at this stage, it was inevitable I'd find it difficult going somewhere else. The main difference between the two orchestras is probably the repertoire. At the BSO I'd done mainly conventional repertoire, but then at the BBC I was thrown in the deep-end with all sorts of more "unknown" repertoire and plenty of new music too. I did some great programmes during my trial: the first week was two separate programmes with Sibelius *Symphony No. 7* on Wednesday and Dvorak's *Symphony No. 9* on Friday. Some other trial highlights included a European tour including Bruckner's *Symphony No. 6* in the Musikverein, Shostakovich *Symphony No. 11* at the Proms, and Bruckner's *Symphony No. 7* in the Bridgewater Hall. I think it would be fair to say that the trial at the BBC Phil was fun and nerve-wracking in equal measure! However, as with my experiences at the BSO, I'm very appreciative that I always felt well supported by the section in Manchester and have done so ever since.



Ben with Tom Kane (left) in the BBC Philharmonic

I started as Section Principal Horn in June 2020 and, as I've alluded to already, it's been a real mixed bag of challenging repertoire. For obvious reasons, things took a while to get going when I first started, so we got to play lots of Classical repertoire that I hadn't really

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expected to be doing along with lots of other small, chamber orchestra-sized repertoire due to social distancing. Things gradually picked up and I suppose we finally got back up to business as usual by last summer when we had an action-packed Proms season including Tippett *Symphony No. 4*, Sibelius *Symphony No. 2* and Shostakovich *Symphony No. 15*.

**Before we talk about the next exciting step in your career could you fill us in on what you do in your spare time?**

Yes, of course. I like to keep myself busy away from the horn and the main way I do that is by volunteering as an Emergency Responder with the London Ambulance Service. I joined the scheme in 2017 when I was still at the Academy, and it was the perfect non-musical hobby to get into. To briefly summarise what Emergency Responders do, we're crewed with another volunteer to respond to some of the highest priority 999 calls on blue-lights to work alongside regular, full-time staff. It's been a great way for me to step away from music for a while, and up until very recently I've been the only musician on the scheme, so you get to spend a day with colleagues from all walks of life and all sorts of professions. Aside from this, about a year ago I adopted a rescue dog from Romania so she keeps me very busy too!

**I gather you'll be leaving Manchester in August to take up a new role as Joint Principal of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra?! Congratulations, that's really amazing! Tell us a little bit about their selection process and any coming highlights.**

That's right! I started working with the RPO about a year ago, and in that time I've done various bits of work including tours to Poland, Slovenia and Switzerland. Another particular highlight was Mahler *Symphony No. 8* at the Royal Albert Hall, and following that I was offered the job in December. Whilst I'm of course going to miss my colleagues in Manchester, I'm really looking forward to moving back down to London to join the brilliant RPO section. I'll start the new role officially in the summer, but between now and then I'm looking



forward to tours of Spain and Japan as well as various concerts in the UK too.

**Congratulations to Ben on this wonderful achievement and I'm sure we all join together as a community to wish him well in his new job. EL**



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