



Felix Klieser

Photo: MJ Kim

As horn players, we all face challenges when it comes to playing our instrument; some of us are more successful than others at overcoming these hurdles. As we struggle to make technical improvements, to conquer tricky passages, where can we look for inspiration? **Richard Steggall** had the pleasure of meeting a player that has broken through every barrier put in front of him. If you can rise from being born into a non-musical family, without arms, to being a world-class international soloist then we must all listen and learn. Meet a true inspiration: **Felix Klieser**.

Hi Felix. You've been spending a lot of time in the UK over the past two years.

Yes. Yes. This season and last season, I was an Artist in Residence of the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra.

And you're playing at the BBC Proms this year with the BSO. Is that the culmination of your residency?

It's actually a separate thing as I've now finished my residency, but playing at the Proms is a great way to end things.

It certainly is! I guess it's been interesting for you as an Artist in Residence, because you've not just played concertos, but you've done some chamber stuff and masterclasses. That's quite an unusual situation to be in, isn't it, with an orchestra?

Yeah, I've played orchestral concerts, but also many chamber music concerts. I made a programme with the Mozart *Horn Quintet*, the Mozart *Piano Quintet* and the Brahms *Horn Trio*. Usually you cannot programme these together because you have so many different musicians for one chamber music concert. This was something which I enjoyed very much because I had the chance to play with so many different types of group in one concert.

Playing chamber music with orchestral members is something you usually don't do: you play with an orchestra for the concertos, and then you have your chamber music colleagues who you play chamber music with. It was great to have contact with, and be given the chance to learn about, individual people within the orchestra. That's something which is very new and it was very nice to have this experience.

Having contact with the players also gave me a better offstage experience because normally when I go to an orchestra, you play through the piece, look at a couple of spots, go back to your hotel, play the concert and that's all.

Do you enjoy that life on the road?

Yes. For me it's fun right now because I have no kids or anything. I like having the chance to travel to so many different cities and countries and to learn about so many different cultures and to be in contact with so many different people. This is something which I really enjoy; I think it's a real privilege to have the chance to do this. I love to try different food – whenever I go to Italy I'm looking to have some pretty good espressos and good pastas. These are the small things, you know, which I really like.

You were in the National Youth Orchestra of Germany. Did you ever have any ambitions to have a career in an orchestra?

I was there from around 15 to 18, and then I started to study music. Then, after about two years of my Bachelor degree, I started to play solo concerts and made my first recording, *Reveries*, which was quite successful and sold many, many CDs. And that success meant I got the chance to make a second

recording with orchestra (Joseph and Michael Haydn horn concertos), and this was the beginning of everything as I had the chance to do solo work. If after two years or three years it didn't work out and I couldn't make a living, I had the chance to go back to the university and start a career in an orchestra.

So it was never your plan to become a soloist?

No, it was my plan to get a good position in a good orchestra. It was a surprise when my solo career took off, but when you have a very successful debut record, then you will get a chance for another recording. After two recordings, I had one with piano and one with orchestra, so I had a very good base to start from. If the first recording wasn't that successful, then I don't think I'd be doing this now.

I also received the ECHO Klassik best young artist prize in 2014, which in Germany is a very, very big thing, which led to live broadcasts and television and so on. This was also very helpful in the beginning.

Looking at the CDs you've made, would it be fair to say it's very brave of you to attempt the Brahms Trio and the Mozart horn concertos both in your twenties?

Yes, definitely.

Was there pressure from the record company to get those out?

You know, the record company wanted to have the Mozart concertos for the second recording! I was 23, and I didn't feel that I was in a situation where I can record the Mozarts because, for me, the concertos are not the most difficult thing ever written for the horn from the technical side, but from the musical side you need many, many experiences with music, with life, with everything, to understand them well. So we did the Haydn concertos instead, but they were still pushing me to record the Mozarts.

And so I was still young when I recorded the Mozart concertos, but for me, it didn't feel like I was **too** young anymore. I think the only big repertoire I haven't recorded now is the Strauss concertos, and this is also something where I want to wait a little bit more so it's not the next recording or the recording after.

What's really nice about your recordings is the way that you use some quite unusual repertoire alongside those big standards.

Yeah. The first recording was all original repertoire for the French horn, but now I'm in a period where I want to create something new, find new repertoire, find new music for the horn. I made my *Beyond Words* (Baroque arias for horn) album in 2021 where everything was arranged for horn and orchestra, and this was the most successful recording I've ever done. It was in the top ten of not the classical charts, but the German pop charts! This helped me understand that the horn can do much more than the Mozart concertos or the Strauss concertos.

The next thing I'm doing is a Christmas album that we're re-



recording in June, for horn and orchestra, and also in the summer I'm recording some film music such as *The Avengers* main theme and music from *Harry Potter* and *Skyfall*.

You know, I don't know if this will really work or if this is a good idea, but I want to try it and I want to learn. The trouble with being a soloist is that 90% of all orchestras want to have Mozart's fourth horn concerto, and so there's no development in your musical way of thinking when you always play the same repertoire. That's the reason why I want to look for new music and new ways to use the horn.

When did you start playing the horn?

I started when I was four. No one in my family was making music and I cannot even remember where I'd first seen the instrument, so that's a mystery. All I know is I wanted to play this exact instrument. So I went to the local music school and they said, okay, you're maybe a little bit too young so they recommended that I play something different, maybe the piano or percussion, but I insisted on the horn.

It wasn't a beautiful sound that I created, but it was a sound. I sat on the ground with the instrument on the ground and we were about the same height! But as I grew up, the instrument didn't grow up with me, so I had to find a solution to that. Someone built me a platform to hold the horn, and the next step was to create a stand. Of course, it wasn't the idea at that time that I would ever travel with the instrument!

Did you find the horn easy when you first started?

Although I started at the age of four, it took me to the age of six or seven to be able to play the first real piece of music, so that was a very long period. In the beginning no one saw me as a big, talented horn player because the steps were very, very small. But then I got a recording from my teacher when I was about 9

years old of the Mozart concertos with Hermann Baumann and this was the very first time that I heard that it's possible to play together with other people, rather than just on my own, for my own pleasure.

This was a very special moment for me because I decided that I wanted to play the instrument as well as possible. There was no plan to do it professionally or to become a soloist, but I put all my energy and all my time into the instrument. There were many, many occasions where I felt like I hit a wall that I couldn't break through; the feeling that this is maybe the maximum I can do with the instrument, that there's a limit. And I've had this situation so many times in my life, that then I try to work out why there's a limit there? What's the reason I can't get past this point.

Can you give us an example?

When I was 13 years old, I never felt comfortable when I played in the lesson or on stage. And it was not just that I was nervous (that's normal!) but it was something different. I didn't understand why the feeling was different. And then I suddenly understood that it was that the whole of my family house was carpeted but when you went to the music school, there was no carpet, and when you go on stage, there's no carpet. I understood that I lost confidence because my playing felt and sounded different. So I had to sort it out. I made a plan to practise every day in a different room. But of course, usually you don't have 20 rooms in your home – you have maybe two or three – but then you can change your playing position in that room: maybe one day you play in this direction, the other day you play in that direction. Then I started to play in bathrooms and I threw everything out to change the acoustic. There are huge echoes in a bathroom, so it's not a comfortable place to play a brass instrument. I looked for some spaces where the acoustic and the atmosphere were as horrible as possible. Then when I performed in horrible acoustics, it didn't bother me, because I was very familiar with the situation.

This was the point where I learned, okay, when you have a limit, then there's always the reason why you have that limit. And when you understand the reason why the limit is there, then you can do something about it; you can find a solution to overcome your limit.

When I was 16 or 17 years old, I was able to play most of the repertoire, but I didn't have enough stamina in my lips. So I wrote a programme, kind of like a gym programme: I took the second movement of Mozart's *Horn Concerto No. 4* and played through that movement three times in a row. I did this for two or three weeks, and then four times in a row, five times in a row, six times in a row. I trained my lips like a sportsman, and right now I can play a two-hour recital without getting tired.

Looking back at when I was 15 or 16, I wasn't really that talented on my instrument. I had to always find a way to overcome situations.

Do you think your initial struggles with stamina were not helped by the fact you don't have a hand in the bell? A good hand position can really aid stability in the high register and you must have extremely strong chops to overcome that!

Of course. And it's not just a problem of the high notes, the biggest problem is the colour of the sound which was initially completely different – more like a trumpet, more silver, more direct. So I had to make many experiments about how to change the colours. I had to try changing my embouchure, changing the position of my tongue, changing how wide my mouth was open and so on. And then I had to check to see if the colour was different, had it changed in a way that I wanted it to? You know, this is something that many people ask me a lot: do I have a special technique or something? I've no special technique. There are many, many, many, many small things in the way that you play that can control our sound.

For me, right now, the sound is the most important thing, because there is no good musician with a horrible sound; there's no amazing singer with a horrible voice. But when I teach people, I realise that maybe 80 or 90% of young musicians are not able to listen to themselves. If they play the opening of Strauss *Horn Concerto No. 1* and I ask how beautiful was it? Was it aggressive? Or charming? Then most students are not able to give a real answer because they are not able to listen to themselves. This is something which I learnt to do very young because often I played something really horribly and I had to learn to listen to myself and to control myself. Now I think a lot about colour: is it a good colour or not a good colour? Is it dark and round or is it silver or whatever? This is something which you need to do to become a good musician – you have to be able to listen to yourself, to understand yourself. And then you can become your own teacher, because, in the end, we are all our own teachers. And when you're good at being your own teacher, you can do just about anything!

I think that's so interesting because I see a lot of students trying to make a warmer sound just by closing their hand off in the bell!

But the problem is when you change the position of the hand then you don't just change the colour, you change the intonation, the articulation, the dynamics. So you change many things that you don't want to change. There are other ways to change colour.

Other young players try to change the intonation all the time with the right hand, without understanding that moving the right hand likewise changes the colour, the articulation and many, many, many more things – which is not helpful.

So, sort of accidentally, you're an excellent role model for how to play different styles of music and change your colour without using your right hand. I think that's important for horn players to hear.

You can learn to change colours and articulation in lots of different ways. You can work on the tongue and the air – the air energy – in the mouth. You can work on changing just one thing in your playing, the colour or intonation for example, without also changing something else.

You play on an Alexander 103. Has it been modified in any way?

Only that there is an extra trigger behind the 3rd valve, but the original one's still there.

And for those who don't follow you on social media, your horn, called Alex, has a bit of a life of his own?

Ha. Ha! He started off on Instagram during lockdown when we couldn't perform, but he's a bit tired now so he's in his case!

Well good luck to you, and Alex, for your performances at the BBC Proms, and we hope to see you back in the UK soon! RS

Felix will be playing at Prom 24 on Wednesday 2nd August at 7.30pm (to be broadcast on BBC TV) and also at Prom 25 which is a "Relaxed Prom" at 11.30am on Thursday 3rd August



Vienna horn, model 109D

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