

Martin Owen

International soloist and Principal Horn of the BBC Symphony Orchestra, **Martin Owen** released his latest CD in August on the Chandos label. In September, BHS Chair **Lindsey Stoker** caught up with him for a coffee following his performance of the Ruth Gipps *Horn Concerto* with the BBC Philharmonic. Top of the agenda was discussing how to attempt the not insignificant challenge of recording both of the Strauss concertos and the Weber *Concertino* and Schumann's *Konzertstück* for four horns and orchestra.

Are the three solo pieces the horn equivalent to an Iron-man triathlon or the Three Peaks Challenge?

I think a horn player may look at the repertoire and think that, but for anyone else they would see a Romantic horn concerto disc. It's something that catalogues the development of the horn through the important stages where the valve horn was starting to be accepted. It's particularly interesting having someone who uses the most advanced techniques in the earliest piece, the Weber *Concertino*, then Schumann picking up those ideas with lots of valve use, and having Strauss moving on from Schumann, writing his first concerto that is light and has all the vigours of youth. Then 59 years later, in the second Strauss concerto, you've got the other end of the spectrum with a totally different sound, and that's what I wanted to get into the disc: how the sound has changed over this time. When Ralph Couzens [Chandos Managing Director] came to me with the idea "let's get some nice horn rep done" this was the first thing that was important to me. Then he suggested "let's get a really good recording of the Schumann *Konzertstück* in there too, and make a disc full of lovely music that people will want to listen to". Luckily, they chose me to do it.

And they said can you do it in two days?!

To be fair, we did have a full day for the *Konzertstück*!



Photo: Davide Cerati

Since you mention the *Konzertstück* – what a great line up!

Yes, in conversation with Ralph Couzens, and Brian Pidgeon the recording engineer, they suggested that since I played in Berlin for a while, and play a lot in Europe, had I thought about putting together an expats' quartet? So we thought, yes, why not? We were delighted to get Chris Parkes, Alec Frank-Gemmill and Sarah Willis.

You looked like you were having a lot of fun doing it?

We really were, it was fun. I mean they're all fabulous horn players and I wanted us all to "play with the music" so it was like trying to dispel the idea that the piece is really hard, because it really isn't. It was a real joy just to experiment and have fun playing some of the phrases with the other guys, because their techniques are phenomenal, and I think that comes across on the disc.

It definitely does! How do you prepare for something like this, whilst fulfilling an orchestral schedule?

You've got to take some time out. It's hard work; you've got to be really intelligent about the way you practise for it as well, you can't just keep slogging. I mean, this summer, playing lots of hard pieces with the BBCSO in the Proms, your lip transforms into something else, something that's maybe fairly adept at playing Mahler symphonies and Bruckner. But you then need to transform it into something that can cope with the flexible demand of solo work, and that was the difficult thing about it. Just taking a bit of time out and

putting in the hours, putting in the work, is so important because recording is a whole lot more difficult than just playing it through once. You've got to be prepared to play things through again and again, and a lot of the time not because of your own playing.

Yes, you might do a great take but someone else misses something.

It's not even wrong notes most of the time, it's for balance issues, or just getting things really together. John Wilson was a master at getting this fantastic orchestra [BBC Philharmonic] to play absolutely together on repertoire they haven't played very much, and very, very quickly, they just rose to the challenge – they were fabulous.

Of all the pieces you did which did you find the most challenging?

I always thought it would be the Weber *Concertino*, just be-

cause there are so many technical difficulties in it, but I think the piece I found the most challenging to get the right feel of was the Strauss second concerto. I wanted to make sure that the sound was a little bit more thoughtful in a way, to try and get something that's not heavy, and I don't even mean laboured either, but something that's just a little bit more drawn out, a little bit older and wiser than the young Strauss. Also, it's a very complex score, incredibly complex, there are a lot of different layers just like in all late Strauss, and this was really quite a challenge to get it absolutely together – but I think we managed it in the end. Stamina-wise, for example, playing that first page again and again and again, it's just something you have to accept, you just do it and you hope that in the end they use something that you liked as well, because that doesn't always happen.

Were you involved in the production process or did you get to listen to any of it?

Barely. I think you have to trust that they will do a good job



and stop worrying about it – they know more about recording than I do.

At the moment you are doing the Gipps Concerto, which is a very interesting piece with a whole spectrum of different challenges.

Yes, it's quite like an Olympic task as well to play, but there are two fantastic recordings out there: one with David Pyatt and the London Philharmonic Orchestra, and one that Ben Goldscheider recorded recently with the Philharmonia, and they're fairly different in their approach. They're lovely to listen to, both recordings really helped when I was preparing for this and I got lots of good ideas from them. But, yes, again, it's a very different kind of challenge, you need to be incredibly nimble and have a very good high register and I hope an adequate low register as well, but the better your low register is, the more you can be expressive in places where you wouldn't quite expect it.

Any tips for aspiring young players attempting the Gipps? They often want to have a go at the next challenging piece.

I would say just compartmentalise all the little sections in this piece, just focus on them individually, try not to run before you can walk. Lots of good slow practice and find a



(L-R) Sarah Willis, John Wilson, Alec Frank-Gemmill, Chris Parkes and Martin Owen

way to play it at a sensible speed before trying to match what you think the speed is going to be. Also, I think you have to be aware that it's actually a bit tougher than it looks on the page sometimes, but I think that's like most concertos.

Are there any other imminent Martin Owen recordings?

In between these two recordings I recorded a trio disc for Chandos with Francesca Dego (violin) and Allesandro Taverna (piano) at the end of May: Brahms, Ligeti, and a transcription of the Mozart horn quintet. It was a nice disc to do, particularly as the Mozart quintet was a transcription by Brahms's friend, Ernst Nau- mann, and the Ligeti is a homage to Brahms as well, although they're very different pieces!

There's also the recently resurfaced arrangement by Arnold Cooke of his *Arioso and Scherzo* for trio which was written to go with the Brahms. Are there any more pieces you want to record?

I'm not sure what the next project might be yet... just looking forward to a holiday in a few days' time! **LS**



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