

# Feature interview: Richard Watkins

At the 2023 British Horn Festival at the Royal Academy of Music, **Richard Watkins** received an Honorary Membership of the British Horn Society in recognition of over 40 years (and counting) at the top of the horn profession. To mark this event, **Richard Steggall** met up with him at the RAM to discuss his career so far.

**You've been in a recording studio all day – what do you enjoy about studio work?**

Well, today's sessions were just a brass section recording the music for a video game. Sometimes these can be the less enjoyable type of session as they can be very tiring, but I now get a bumper for video games and films. Today's bumper was Laurence Davies [Principal Horn of the Philharmonia] who has to be the Rolls Royce of bumpers! He just makes a glorious, wonderful sound.

I really like the camaraderie of all the colleagues in studio work, because invariably, if you're doing a film with eight horns, they're all fantastic players. So you've really got to make sure you're on your A-game all the time – there's no kind of slacking – but everyone's on your side.

And if anyone has to play some horribly lonely horn solo, not one of these wonderful colleagues would want to swap places and show you how it's done – far from it. Everyone's thinking, "I'm glad you're doing it!" So there's a great camaraderie and it's really good catching up with other players; catching up with the gossip and people's news.

I also really do enjoy working with the composers as much as anything. They often ask for their favourite player, so they're writing for that person and they've got that person's sound in mind. Those relationships take time to build up, but those composers come in on a regular basis: someone like Hans Zimmer or Henry Jackman will record in London two or three times a year, so you get to know them quite well. Whereas if you're doing an orchestral project with a big composer, you're probably not going to see that composer again for a long time.

**One of your most famous solos was from the film *Prometheus*. Can you tell us a bit about that?**

It was actually a bit of a rewrite of something. I'm not quite sure of the politics in the Hollywood film world, but they brought in Harry Gregson Williams, who I know very well, to write some parts of the music in conjunction with another composer, and so Harry was designated to write the opening and closing titles – and he wrote this really difficult horn solo.



You don't normally get this much notice, but he did actually send me a link to the part and a sound file the day before. So I did have a bit of advance warning and knew it was quite tricky. He emailed me saying, "look, it goes up to a high D, I don't know if this is even possible." So I thought of Jack Brymer's quote and said all the textbooks say it's impossible, but I'll have a go!

And that's one of the beauties of recording: you can just do it until you get it right. And it took time to bed in with the strings, so we did it a few times.

I once got asked to play in a "Prometheus with Live Orchestra" gig and I just said no – I wouldn't wish that on anyone!

**One of the most common questions that comes up on Facebook horn groups is who was playing the horn on *The Crown*?**

Well there were several French horn players, but I think the questions are asking about the rather lonely solo that starts in Series 3. The composer, Martin Phipps, who's actually Britten's godson, booked a session and he wanted to recreate a sort of foghorn in the distance, to represent London in the smog. We recorded it in Air studios, which is quite a big converted church. I knew it was going to be quite a lonely session when I walked in to see one chair, one music stand and a bottle of water!

We recorded it in the main hall, and then I went to the gallery of the church, tried it there, and he got quite interested and excited. So then after that he decided to have the lonely horn (inspired by a foghorn, believe it or not) as his kind of calling card for a lot of the episodes of *The Crown*. I even think the sixth series ends with the Queen walking in Windsor Castle to this rather lovely horn theme, which is really rather nice.

**I suppose you shaped your horn sound in the eleven years that you were Principal Horn of the Philharmonia. Can you tell me about that time? I guess it seems like a long time ago now?**

Well yes, I left in the nineties, but I did enjoy it hugely. So I look back at that time with great fondness.

It was an interesting era because it was the era of the CD. I mean obviously they were remastering great recordings of the century but sometimes they weren't able to do that, so everything had to be re-recorded. The Philharmonia started in the 1950s predominantly as a recording orchestra, and my time coincided with doing a lot of recording, which was great, but also there was a lot of touring.

I did have a great time; a really concentrated time. I was very fortunate that the conductor that I mainly worked with was Sinopoli, and the tours we did going all around the world were playing the big Germanic Romantic repertoire: Bruckner, Strauss and Mahler. It was great – tough and tiring – but I went to some fantastic places and I wouldn't have swapped it for the world.

**What prompted you to leave?**

I started a family (my boys were born in 1995 and 1997) and at the time the orchestra was literally away on tour for seven months of the year, and that's just something I didn't really want to do, so it was time to move on. I thought I didn't want to give up orchestral playing completely, but I just thought, well, you know, there'll be occasions to do orchestral playing again, and at the time I didn't really feel I needed to have

to play Mahler *Symphony No. 1* again. I think I chalked up 80-something performances of Mahler 1!

**You've got a wonderful reputation in the contemporary music world, particularly premiering solo works. Did that all start with Peter Maxwell Davies's *Sea Eagle*?**

While I was still at the Royal Academy where I was studying with Derek Taylor (having previously had lessons privately with Ifor James), I joined the *Fires of London*, which was Maxwell Davies's own group. It was a very small ensemble, and one of the pieces that Maxwell Davies was doing at the time was called *The Lighthouse*, which has a very, very prominent role for the horn. The horn had to sit in the audience and act as a kind of judge to a court of inquiry on stage. So I basically had to learn the first act, with horn parts flying around. I had to play in the audience – sometimes I could be given my own box in the theatre, but sometimes they just put me on the end of a row; people jumped out of their skin because it was all very loud!

Then Maxwell Davies, after working with him for a little bit, just came up to me one day and said, "look, I've been writing a piece and I wonder if you'd be interested". And it was just called "Study for Solo Horn". So I looked at it and after a couple of days – and I'm not sure if this was a good idea or not – I heard these words come out of my mouth and said, "Why don't you write some more to go with it?" And then he went back to Orkney and started writing the slow movement and the last movement, which is the time where he came face to face with a sea eagle that had gone slightly AWOL from, I think, the west coast of Scotland. So that's how *Sea Eagle* was born.

**The last premiere I heard you play was the Mark-Anthony Turnage concerto "Towards Alba" with the Philharmonia, which was just before lockdown – and also the day Barry Tuckwell died, from what I remember. What's happened to that piece?**

It's a shame. I mean it came at the wrong time. There were quite a few other performances planned actually, mainly in North America. We were going to play the same programme as the premiere in the Royal Festival Hall – which was quite daunting because I also had to play the Britten *Serenade* with Allan Clayton in the second half – which wasn't my idea, by the way! So we were going to do that several times; it would have been great to give the piece more of a run out. And then sadly, of course, COVID hit. It got postponed, and then of course people move on to different projects. And after COVID hit the arts industry massively, many people moved on and started afresh. So sadly all those kind of projects, like the Turnage, in particular, got sidelined.

I do remember when I was waiting backstage with Esa-Pekka Salonen before the premiere, and he said, I think it's a good piece; it's difficult but not impossible. It's got a nice, catchy



tune in the last movement and he said, I think this could be a keeper. So we'll keep working to try to get that tricky second performance!

**The Nash Ensemble is another group that you've been associated with.**

Yeah, I've been playing with them for 25 years and more, and they're great. Of course in a chamber music ensemble, the horn has a small role, but I do quite a few concerts with them, mainly pieces like the Schubert *Octet* and Beethoven *Septet*. But we also have a very successful concert once a year, usually in March, at the Wigmore Hall where there's a whole array of new music, so the horn features quite heavily in that. And I've been lucky enough to have quite a few commissions. James MacMillan has written a *Horn Quintet* for horn and string quartet – which is a great piece, amongst many others.

**And it's great that you've recorded a lot of these commissions. If there was a young player that wanted to be introduced to the extensive discography of Richard Watkins, could you pick your top three albums for them to listen to?**

Ha, OK... three recordings? Well for a good representation I'm probably going to play it safe here.

Firstly, it was a great thrill and honour to record the Mozart concertos, which I did a long time ago in 1990-something with Richard Hickox and the City of London Sinfonia. So I really enjoyed that. It was good to get on the ladder of the Mozart concertos, because I think if any player wants to make a solo career, they have to be judged by their Mozart recording.

Then further down the line, I was very pleased and delighted to make a disc for NMC (a specialist, modern contemporary label) of all the works that have been written for me, so I enjoyed that tremendously. Then the third one... tricky. I really enjoyed playing the Malcolm Arnold horn concertos because I think they're great pieces that any horn student should try and learn. I was very pleased to do the Glière *Horn Concerto*. I mean, that's a great piece; divides opinion, but we don't really have a huge array of Romantic concertos, do we?

**So definitely the Mozart and the pieces written for you. So Arnold or Glière for the third?**

Hmm... there's another one. I made a recital disc called *The Romantic Horn* which I enjoyed particularly because it was great to work – and celebrate working – with my friend and colleague Julius Drake. He's just the most wonderful pianist. He mainly works with all the very, very top singers – so he fits me in when he can! We do the occasional concert and whenever I'm working with him it's just a joy. So maybe I'll go for that one as my third recording.

**You've had a long association with the Royal Academy of Music. I guess there wasn't long between you being a student and a teacher?**

I forgot when I started teaching at the academy; I'm pretty sure it was 1988. As a student – well it was very different then. Now colleges are much more accommodating and encouraging of professional opportunities; then it was a slightly different world, so I didn't quite finish the course actually. I'm not sure it's something I'm particularly proud of, but I only did two terms before I left the Academy in 1982, I think. And then I started teaching there five or six years later.

**So there was a little window between being kicked out and forcing your way back in!**

Yeah, and there are still some people who still remember that time. About a week ago, I bumped into my old history of music teacher in the RAM canteen – George Biddelcombe; a lovely man. He said, "I'm still waiting for that essay that you promised me 45 years ago." I said, "I haven't forgotten, George, I'm still working on it."

**I was going to ask you what your plans for the future are, but I guess first on the list is finishing that essay...**

Ha ha! The future... it's tricky because when I see other friends at home from other walks of life, they often say "I just can't wait to retire". But I guess one of the advantages of being a freelance player in particular is you can pick and choose a little bit. I dabbled, actually, in trying to do quite a lot less playing, to just try to sort of preserve my playing. But it's funny: it's a bit like, I suppose, running or something. You've really got to keep on doing it. So now I try not to



Richard Watkins receives honorary membership of the British Horn Society from Michael Thompson and Lindsey Stoker



work flat-out – I have no interest in doing three-tier session days, running around to other recording studios having already done six hours in one day.

I'm still trying to do a mixture of things: teaching, a little bit of chamber music, solo playing, and some of the session work, but I try to take a lot of holidays, have lots of breaks.

My wife works at a school, so we try to take time off every half-term. I love teaching, I love playing. And people still seem keen to ask me to play, so I'll try and do it.

**Thank you for taking the time to talk to us today, Richard, and congratulations on a wonderful career so far and your Honorary BHS membership! RS**



A video of Richard answering questions from BHS members is available to view on the BHS YouTube channel and on the BHS website. Go to the members area and click on "videos".

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