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Byron Fulcher



Having been asked to interview London trombone players on their lives, careers and everything else in between, I started with Byron, principal of the Philharmonia, an orchestra that is busy doing a London season at the Royal Festival Hall, whilst also touring the world and recording anything and everything that it can.

I don't know Byron, so I lurked outside Cadogan Hall at lunch, apparently searching for someone 'short and hairy' to interview. There were quite a few of these wandering around, but most were intent on not being interviewed by a woman hanging out by a lamppost with a searching look on her face.

Byron, it turned out, was chatty and unassuming, kind, slightly reserved and generous (yes, he bought the coffees). He didn't seem to mind having his lunch hour, in between rehearsing Schubert and Berg, taken over by a woman asking impertinent 'just tell me about your life' questions.

We began by talking about how he got started in music. Like many in the industry Byron's early years were a life of brass banding, but in the West Country, not up north. Coming from a musical but not brass playing family, Byron was looked up and down by a chap more in the know than the parents and told he would be an excellent tenor horn player! (Quite what qualities were so tenor horn-ish about his face I'm not sure.) When presented with a horn, he insisted on also taking a trombone too. Predictably, and thankfully for the orchestral world, the tenor horn remained in its case. Byron began learning trombone with Albert Chappell, a guru who had recently retired to Cornwall and made quite an impact.

Byron aspired to a career in music, auditioned and was given a place to study under Eric Crees at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama in 1988. A man perfect for Byron, as he just talked straight! As

with many ambitious musicians Byron dreamed of gaining a position in a London orchestra, but, like so many, faced a dead men's shoes problem; the great and the good of the orchestral trombone world had sat in their nice orchestral jobs for quite some years and were insisting on keeping them. There were literally no jobs available.

In 1992, Byron moved to northern Spain, to a region known for its food and wine, and started to play for the newly formed Orquesta Sinfonica de Galicia. He returned a year and a half later to freelance, swiftly followed by a move to Glasgow to work for the BBC Scottish. There, music became a wonderful balance of excellent playing, working with a great team and finishing the day with a round of golf with the lads. (Not that there was nothing to do musically. It just gets dark very late up there!) This lasted 18 months before he secured the principal trombone job at the Philharmonia Orchestra, where he has been for the last 14 years. Byron also holds the principal position with London Sinfonietta, an orchestra renowned for 'placing the best of contemporary classical music at the heart of today's culture'.

I asked him to recall one of the most inspirational gigs he's done and one of the earliest was part of the trial with the Philharmonia. The orchestra was under the baton of a particularly well renowned conductor who, when asked to sign in at the stage door, provided them with a predictable "don't you know who I am" speech. The energy of the orchestra moved up a gear and combined with some challenging trombone repertoire, produced some phenomenal performances. Another notable experience was undertaking Berio's Sequenza V for the 2012 prom with the London Sinfonietta. Just imagine the challenge; eight minutes of solo trombone in front of the Albert Hall (it has a capacity of 5000), having memorized a piece known for its challenging multiphonics and extended techniques and the sheer physicality of the performance whilst, yes, dressed up as a clown.

Byron is known in the industry as a man capable of a giant orchestral sound. In fact I've heard that some say (and not ironically), when faced with a piece which requires a bit more oomph: "Can you play that a bit more Byronically?" So I asked him how he managed to sustain that phenomenal sound.

"I certainly don't naturally or easily make a big sound, but I do have a strong idea of what I'm trying to achieve with the noise. Occasionally I get close to what's in my head, but it's always something to think about.... The short answer of course is to practice."

Centre Story

Eventually we talked of current projects and, like many musicians, Byron's career is a portfolio of teaching and performing. He is currently a professor at the Royal College of Music, teaching and conducting the trombone ensemble.

The next project is taking the ensemble to Cornwall on a South West Tour, in partnership with the newly formed Cornwall Music Service Trust; a trust developed to prevent the loss of music services for children throughout the county. The ensemble will hopefully inspire local school children and the flourishing Cornish brass band community. It is, as Byron said: "An opportunity to give something back to the community I grew up in."

If you are in the West Country and want to get involved, be inspired, and support this adventure, you can see them at Taunton on 23rd October, Truro School and Camborne on October 24th and Truro School on 25th October.

Helen Vollam

It wasn't hard to spot Helen, she was the only person walking into Weatherspoons with a trombone case (I always pick the classiest of London venues to chat). Helen is a quietly modest and self-assured musician, who foolishly suggested it wouldn't take too long to talk about her musical career! I beg to differ. Helen is currently principal of BBC Symphony Orchestra (BBCSO), and works regularly with the Chamber Orchestra of Europe (COE) and Bones Apart. There is at least a pint's worth of conversation there.

Helen started playing at seven when her family moved to Somerset. Annie Higgs (an inspirational educator, still energizing local Cheddar children into brass playing) encouraged Helen to try out a few instruments and she quickly found the best noise she could make was on the trombone. A few years later her family moved to Essex, where they found Willi Watson, the knowledgeable and funny horn player and teacher who inspired Helen to broaden her horizons. He encouraged her parents to take her to a National Youth Orchestra prom and so followed an unforgettable night at the Royal Albert Hall listening



**KATE GEE TALKS
TO THREE
VIRTUOSO
PRINCIPAL
TROMBONE
PLAYERS FROM
LONDON
ORCHESTRAS**



to kids not much older than herself perform Stravinsky's *Firebird*. Helen left that experience realizing that perhaps being a professional musician could be a possibility, even if the school careers service didn't recognize it as a proper job! At 15 she began lessons with Denis Wick and soon made it to the finals of the BBC Young Musician (which she since has adjudicated). After five years with Eric Crees at The Guildhall School of Music, working with the EUYO, she began freelancing and trialling for orchestral jobs, landing the BBCSO job in 2004.

Playing trombone for a living is a job that Helen absolutely loves and yet she says that she "still feels like a beginner every day". Each day is a new challenge and a new set of opportunities:

"As your ear and technique improve, the more listening you do to other types of players, whomever they are, whatever they play - your standards get higher and higher, but so do your musical aspirations. You're trying to become better and better all the time.'

The BBCSO, under the baton and distinct energy and enthusiasm of Sakari Oramo, has a varied repertoire that is excellent from a brass perspective, including an enviable legacy for commissioning contemporary works. Just over this summer she has played in plenty of proms with the BBCSO, including Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast*, Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloe*, *Holst's Planets*, Shostakovich 7, *Firebird*,

Sibelius 5 6 and 7, Ives 4 and the infamous Last Night of the Proms! When Helen joined them as principal trombonist, there were other vacancies in the brass. Yet training as a musician is mostly on how to play the trombone; no one mentions the other side of orchestral life - sitting on panels and making collaborative decisions about who to have in a team. Daunting no doubt, but as Helen suggests: "You've just got to get on with it."

In Helen's portfolio career she regularly works with Britten Sinfonia, the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, the Royal Northern Symphonia in Gateshead, and the COE. Helen recently performed the epic Schubert 9 with the COE, an ensemble drawing together many of the best players across Europe to form one of the finest chamber ensembles in the world. We talked a lot about chamber work, as it is clearly important and musically inspirational to Helen, who says it requires: "A more delicate way of playing ... because of the smaller string section. It's lovely to do, one of the best things about it is to hear the fantastic string sections and woodwind - really inspiring."

Of course there is also her work with Bones Apart trombone quartet to consider; the all female trombone ensemble created at the Royal Northern College of Music well over a decade ago. Although there is a fair legacy of female trombonists who have been working in the music industry (Sue Addison, Tracy Holloway, Sarah Williams), creating a visibly prominent ensemble with four female trombonists was something of a novelty just after the millennium. Bones Apart have helped challenge the strange cultural assumptions associated with gender and instrument choice; raising the public profile (and existence!) of talented professional female brass musicians. Helen joined this group in 2007 and both plays and arranges for them. Many of the arrangements are available on their website <http://www.bonesapartpublishing.com/trombonequartet.htm>

The future looks interesting for Helen - there's a Mahler 3 to prepare for with the BBC Symphony Orchestra and she is taking a short 'break' to Edinburgh to play part of a Brahms Cycle for the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, under Robin Ticciati; a chance to unwind, change the pace for a little while and play some beautiful music.

Matt Gee

Having been given the task of interviewing London trombonists, Matt Gee is my final interviewee for this month's issue of *The Brass Herald*. He was the hardest to track down, despite or perhaps because I have known Matt for all of his 32 years. The eagle-eyed amongst you will see we share the same surname; I'm his older (more good looking) sister, which makes

interviewing him a somewhat surreal event. Equally well, it could give me the pleasure of telling you all the things about him that nobody knows; at school he was only ever interested in girls, sport and music (in that order), or that as 10 and 12 year olds we were so beastly that whilst practicing for a local duet competition we both wore shin-pads, as one of us would kick the other every time we went wrong. Luckily we got over ourselves and he's now one of my best friends!

Matt grew up in the Midlands and took up the trombone when the local brass band came into junior school, as he figured he could get out of Cubs Sunday morning church parade if he started the trombone. (At the same time Matt had also been scouted for the local Cathedral choir and Midlands Ballet - apparently this was down to some spectacular leaping!) Matt and I were both taught by the late, great, and infinitely patient Bud Fisher. Matt later had lessons with Chris Jeans and we brass banded in Youth Brass 2000 and Foresters Brass right through to leaving home.

Matt also got into orchestral playing quite early, joining the National Youth Orchestra at 14. (Incidentally he also met his wife there too, although it was not until they re-met some 15 years later that they fell in love!) Matt was offered a scholarship to Saturday Junior Guildhall and eventually did his music degree at King's College London. Whilst at King's he had lessons at the Royal Academy of Music with Denis Wick and Dudley Bright, and took a postgraduate degree at the Royal College of Music with Lindsay Shilling.

During his time at university he joined the Gustav Mahler Jugendorchestra, a place for European orchestral musicians to forge their talents early in their career. Matt was lucky in many respects as he moved from his postgraduate course straight into a job at Scottish Opera; he had a short stint with Opera North and then moved to the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra (RPO) six years ago. He has this to say about the work with the RPO: "They have given me some of the most amazing musical experiences I've ever had, with a fantastic team of players. We have done Ravel's *Daphnis*, Bartok's *Miraculous Mandarin*, *The Rite of Spring*.... some of those gigs have been the best stuff I've ever done. That's really saying something, given some of the orchestras I've been lucky enough to work with all over the world!"

I asked Matt a little about orchestral playing and what drives his approach and style to playing: "I aim to bridge the gap between the trumpets and trombones. When you listen to orchestras the trumpets naturally play with a very clear and immediate articulation. However, the trombones often tend to grow into their sound with a slightly woolly articulation. It's no surprise that conductors tell us we're

late. I strive to play with an incredibly clear articulation to match the clarity of the trumpets.”

I followed this up with some questions about the nuances of playing and Matt suggested that if he had to give one piece of advice to budding orchestral trombonists it would be this: “Often my students don’t listen enough to what comes out of the end of the trombone. They assign the success of their performance to ‘having a good or bad day’ and by that they mean how the trombone feels on the face. It’s really important to move away from this. We don’t need to focus on how it feels, but we need to listen more to how it sounds and how we want it to sound... especially how it sounds at the back of a concert hall and not just in the one metre square around you the player.”

Beyond the RPO, Matt’s portfolio career is focused mostly on Orchestral and chamber work. He is a member of the Aurora Orchestra, an orchestra pushing the boundaries of contemporary programming, with a hugely diverse repertoire. This year their prom included Beethoven’s *Pastoral* from memory, and a few years ago they performed Frank Zappa’s *The Adventures of Gregery Peccary*, which contains a trombone part he won’t forget in a hurry! He is also a member of Septura, a seven-piece ensemble who are seeking ‘to redefine



brass chamber music for the 21st century!’ Their current recording project is a ten disc set for Naxos Records, which redefines the musical history of brass chamber music by asking the question ‘what if (insert name of composer) had written for a brass Septet?’ Through clever arrangements and with a team of talented musicians, they are creating an unforgettable canon of classical art-music for chamber ensemble. For Matt, working in this medium is: “Brilliant, it gives you more of a creative outlet than orchestral playing. You can really express yourself

and have a big influence on the musical product.”

Like all the others interviewed here, Matt also teaches, and finds it a pretty good way of evaluating your own playing and performance: “You have to make sure that you at least practice what you preach!” Over the last few years Matt too has still been in education. He has taken a Masters of Arts in Specialised Music Performance (essentially a soloist’s diploma) at the Hochschule der Künste, Bern. As part of this course he had some studio time and so put together his debut solo CD, “Paradiso e Inferno” (www.matthewgee.info). “Paradise e Inferno” is a concept driven album, which celebrates the ‘Jekyll and Hyde’ character of the trombone as a solo instrument. With this work he is trying to broaden the audience for solo trombone, important because it “will hopefully help to develop the future of the instrument.”

Matt is currently planning a follow up disc which will address the comic stereotype surrounding the trombone, as he believes one of the most important things he can do is to increase the repertoire for solo trombone. He will also be on tour with the RPO in Geneva during October, performing *Les Troyens*, Berlioz’s epic five act opera, followed by a tour to America in January, culminating in a trip to Las Vegas, which might contain some extracurricular activities outside trombone playing!

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