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Kevin Morgan



This month I had the pleasure of interviewing three of London's finest tuba players: Kevin Morgan, Principal tuba with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra; Lee Tsarmaklis, Principal tuba with the London Philharmonic Orchestra; and Oren Marshall, Principal tuba with London Brass, and well known for his freelance work crossing musical genres and pushing conventional musical boundaries. Three more different musicians I couldn't have hoped to have a drink with, making November a significantly less grey and dull month than normal.

Kev and I met at one of my favourite station bars, the Betjeman Arms, St. Pancras. Over a white wine spritzer (Kev has been on a health mission over the last year and I'm trying not to drink) we talk about musical and family life. Kev is a Welshman through and through, growing up in Treorchy, South Wales, in the heart of the Rhondda Valley. Treorchy is your typical Welsh small town, a place which had collieries and bands at its heart, and so a strength of identity and comradeship that is rarely found outside of the industrial heartlands. Naturally Kev's family were involved in mining, and both Kev and his brother took after their dad and went into music. Kev's dad Ieuen Morgan was a music educator and conductor of the Parc & Dare Band, and was awarded MBE for his services to music education in 1985. Kev was very much inspired by his dad - following in his footsteps, becoming Principal Euphonium of the Parc & Dare Band at just 12, he can't remember a time when there wasn't music around or he didn't want to be a musician. As you can't make much of an orchestral career on euphonium, Kev faced a choice; switch to trombone and have to relearn the positions or move over to tuba. Of course the tuba won, who wants to play a slidey thing anyway? As a teenager Kev would go up to London to visit his brother Greg, who was training at the Royal Academy of Music, frankly he couldn't wait to get over to London and start a music degree at the Royal College of Music.

Freelancing is perhaps harder now than it once was, what with the supply of musicians increasing, and cultural economics shrinking the pool of recording sessions and live gigs. (I like to use phrases like 'cultural economics' when I teach.... students soon make their own conclusions about the power of industry figureheads, and the impact of globalizing and digitizing something that should be a very human pursuit.) Nonetheless, Kev must have been a talent to be reckoned with. He began freelancing as soon as he started at the College, working with many of the major London orchestras, opera and ballet companies. I have only ever known him as the tuba player with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, so it came as a surprise to hear that he spent most of the last thirty-five years as an extremely successful freelancer. When I asked him how he made a success of it, it was simply "well I signed up to a diary service, was offered some work, did a good job." There's no point asking someone who has freelanced for so long the best places they have been - who can remember those, particularly with touring and brass culture what it was. It turns out, however, that the one place that is still on Kev's hit list for visiting is Australia and New Zealand.

There were too many career highlights to mention here, but one major achievement was creating the opportunity to make and release a solo album, "Virtuoso Tuba" on the ASV label in 1995. This is an album with more notes in it than you can shake a baton at. It contains some brass band classics you'd not expect to hear on tuba: *Carnival of Venice*, *Jenny Jones* and *Flight of the Bumble Bee*; those that you would: *Grandfather's Clock*, and lighter music I'd happily play in the car: *Ain't Misbehavin*, *Stardust* and *The Bear Necessities*.

As well as being contracted to the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Kev finds time to continue freelancing and to teach. He works at the Junior Royal College of Music, Dulwich Prep London, the RAF Music Services in Northolt and Kings College School - work that he finds is both a fantastic opportunity to give back to the industry, and an opportunity to be inspired by the talent and enthusiasm that is coming into the industry. Of course Kev's dad was a well-respected and talented music teacher and conductor, so it's perhaps fitting that he inspired Kev to both become a musician and to both enjoy and consider teaching an important part of a successful musical career.

Oren Marshall

I've had no reason to ever visit Greenwich before, but I mastered the DLR to go and speak to Oren Marshall, Head of Brass at Trinity Laban. I've no expectations because I've not had time to Internet stalk him, having been flung back into the first

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block of undergraduate teaching with a bit of a bump!

Oren didn't disappoint; he was warm, measured and quietly deliberate in his discussions about life, career and everything in between. Naturally I have to ask how and why he began playing the tuba.... An instrument maligned in gender and comedy stereotypes, who on earth would want to play something that's going on for bigger or as big as them when they start? When Oren said he started his musical life as a recorder player, I thought well that's like most people I know, blasting away in a school recorder choir. Unlike most of us, however, Oren carried on and is now an accomplished recorder player. A specialist music school didn't really suit his character (which I think is probably reflected in his approach to music), as he was expelled for misdemeanors and found himself at the local comprehensive. He joined the school band, as his friends were there, in the only vacancy available (tuba), and rapidly realized he could make people laugh doing this instrument. What to do for a career was now sorted.

Oren trained under Steve Wassell at Junior RCM and found a musical father figure in the late John Fletcher. John's unexpected death left a chasm in so many hearts, and a gulf in Oren's musical world in his early 20s. He was left with large shoes to fill, and to do so quite differently with the LSO and London Brass. Oren has stayed with London Brass for the last thirty years, a group which must now be one of the UK's finest chamber ensembles. An ensemble that knows each other so well on and off





KATE GEE
TALKS TO
THREE
VIRTUOSO
TUBA
PLAYERS FROM
LONDON

the stage, that every minutiae of body language, and so musical development and expressiveness, can be understood without so many words. Such efficient, smooth, functionality and brilliant product is incredibly rare. (Psychology calls these types of group 'self-managed work groups', and its very unusual for a group to apparently be so effective, efficient and relatively harmonious in all senses of the word. Something I'd love to know more about, but there simply isn't time to talk about it all).

Like any other musician of his generation (and indeed in this article), Oren's CV is impressive, having worked with every major London orchestra, big bands, chamber ensembles and completed countless film sessions. What is perhaps more interesting to talk about, which makes him stand out, is his interest in solo and collaborative work which crosses genres, styles and instrumental conventions. Oren has pioneered acoustic and electric tuba and cross-genre work by having a two pronged philosophy to work: music is just music - whatever you're trying and get the fundamentals right. I guess if music is just music, then it doesn't matter in many ways what you're doing as genres melt and can be moulded into each other. I imagine it requires both a flexibility of mind, style and musicianship. We get into a discussion of the philosophy of teaching, something close to my heart at the moment, what with more students than ever attending higher education institutions, and the fundamentals of what these are and what they provide and should be providing have changed in their entirety.

Beyond the conservatoire and looking after his kids, one of his most recent projects has been working on the Jazz for Toddlers series, as part of the London Jazz Festival. He does this with Afla Sackey, Ghanaian-born percussionist, vocalist and composer. It's an opportunity for toddlers not to just experience music in the way they may at home, but to physically embody the music and be part of a vibrant, energetic and usually amusing afternoon. And yes, there are plenty of bean bags around for exhausted parents to nap on. I asked Oren what he hoped the future might hold, but I suspect for 'The Jimi Hendrix of Tuba' (not self-titled because I wouldn't have

been able to write that without snorting, but provided by the Guardian's esteemed music writer) it's going to be a mindful one day at a time!

Lee Tsarmaklis

A few weeks earlier I'd taken a jaunt to Henry Wood Hall, a place described as having 'excellent acoustics' and being a 'church in one of the quietest and most beautiful squares of south London'. It is tucked away behind the bustling, colourful Borough Market, known (pre-1970s) as Holy Trinity Church, it is now the regular recording and rehearsal space of the London Philharmonic Orchestra (LPO) and London Symphony Orchestra. All I can say is that it's a total pain to find if you've run out of data and were relying on Google maps, yet there are a couple of unexpectedly welcoming pubs nearby. This day was not for an historic pub tour of south London, but to meet the wonderfully gentle and welcoming Lee Tsarmaklis, principal tuba of the LPO. The evening we meet, Lee had been rehearsing with the LPO, *Bruckner V* under Stanislaw Skrowaczewski, in preparation for a concert at the Royal Festival Hall. At 92, Skrowaczewski remains a master of Bruckner, not only retaining the work from memory but also holding perfect tempi. There was both the sense that today really was another day at work for Lee and yet that the rehearsal was a pretty special occasion.

Over a pint we chat about Lee's upbringing, emigrating from Greece to just outside High Wycombe, when he was just ten. Unlike a Greek education, the UK system automatically gave him the opportunity to learn music; his music teacher took one look at Lee and said: "I've got the perfect thing for you" - presenting him with a tuba, which he absolutely adored. (This was much to the disappointment of his parents, who naturally hoped for something small, that could be kept out the way.)

Lee indulged in school bands and county orchestras, yet despite people saying he was quite good, he had no idea of the possibilities until he met Paul Smith who suggested he audition for the Royal Academy of Music. Lee had a successful audition for the Academy, a year later than normal, which made all the difference to his approach to music. He was a 'real practiser' religiously doing five hours a day; in at 8am, done by 1pm, plenty of time for extra-curricular activities! Listening to Patrick Harrild and then being taught by him was a sheer inspiration for Lee: "To be honest with you, after my first lesson with Patrick, I really wanted to be an orchestral tuba player. I remember having a lesson on Monday morning - I'd go and see Patrick play *Rite of Spring* or Chris McShane playing *Mahler 6* on his trial, and once I'd heard what they did, I thought I want that! So



that's what I did." Having not gone through a specialist music school, Patrick made sure Lee was up to standard and by the end of his first year he had done a date with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra (RPO).

Three years into his degree, Lee auditioned for a job in Hong Kong, got it, and then had to find an atlas and look up where it was. (This was 1991 after all.) He was in Hong Kong for six years, a place full of amazing energy and culture. Perhaps Lee's most memorable musical moment was at the end of his time in Hong Kong, playing in the 1997 handover, when sovereignty was transferred from the UK to China: "I didn't renew my contract after 1997... there were all sorts of rumours it was going to change. We had all sorts of nationalities in the orchestra there. I thought, if this changes I don't want to know. I played in the handover ceremony: the British flag was lowered, the Chinese flag was going up. One of the best evenings of my life, you're part of history."

Returning to the UK was perhaps more of a culture shock than moving to HK; freelancing was tough, he had a few bits of great work, but hardly enough to make a living. Fortunately he was offered the job at the RPO under Gatti, where in stayed for three happy years.

In 2000 he moved to the LPO, where he has been for the last 15 years. The LPO he describes as fantastic; a band with with a certain style and passion, especially for Mahler, Brahms and Bruckner. For eight months a year the orchestra is resident at the Festival Hall and touring around the world. Then for four months they are resident at Glyndeboune, the perfect balance in repertoire.

As well as playing, Lee enjoys teaching at the Royal College of Music. For some, teaching is something that has to be done, for Lee it is an opportunity to be inspired and engaged with new ways of teaching, playing and listening, especially when some fantastic young 'fresh lip' comes through to raise the bar. Of course life is not just music, and having two daughters and a wife who is also a musician means that life can be pretty busy!