

Syrinx magazine

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Interview by Stefano Cioffi for "Syrinx" magazine, January 2004

1. *After 8 and a half years in Amsterdam what has changed in your life and in your way of playing the flute?*

Well, what can I say? In many ways, nothing has changed, and in other ways, everything! In terms of my flute playing, my sound has become much fuller and bigger (I now use more air), I use another flute (I used always solely to play Louis Lot, now more and more often I am playing my Altus) and I think I have been enormously inspired and musically enriched by working with some of the top conductors and soloists of our day.

2. *What do you miss most of England/Wales?*

I am very fortunate in that I still do quite a lot of solo and chamber music work back in the United Kingdom, and so get the chance to keep in regular contact with family and friends and am never really away for long enough to miss it! However, one of the first things I always do when I go back, is go out for a really good curry! Oh, the other thing I miss is milk in tea without having to ask for it!!

3. *Have you ever thought you would have preferred working in a British orchestra?*

Of-course, in many ways it would have been easier to stay in my homeland (see next question), but I think that conditions for British musicians are not something I envy at all. There is also not a hall in Britain to compare with the Concertgebouw... though the new halls in Birmingham and Manchester are very exciting, the tradition and history of Concertgebouw are very inspiring!

4. *Was it difficult starting a new life in Holland?*

In some ways, not at all; the Dutch are very warm and friendly and Amsterdam is a small city so it is very easy to feel as though you know your way around and therefore belong! I love travel, adventure, meeting new people, and luckily don't suffer from homesickness (home is where I happen to be living today!) but of-course, it was not easy in some practical ways - learning a new language, building up a whole new circle of friends, and of-course, keeping in touch with old friends, are all time-consuming occupations!

5. *What are your best memories with the Concertgebouw?*

I have been lucky enough to play in some really amazing concerts with fabulous conductors and soloists; too many to pick out individually! Concerts with people such as Jansons, Haitink, Harnoncourt, and Maria Joao Pirez always feel like the most exciting/moving/touching concert you've ever played! (That is why they are so great I think!) And of-course, the orchestra is famous for its interpretations of Mahler and Bruckner Symphonies each time we give an exciting performance of one of these mighty works, I feel as though I have shared in the telling the story of an entire lifetime, which is very moving! Apart from the music, I love travelling and being lucky enough to visit different countries and see some of the the world's most spectacular sights such as the Taj Mahal , The Great Wall of China and the Pyramids during tours (not only with Concertgebouw!) is a huge bonus for me!

6. *What do you wish you had done and have not been able to do?*

This is beginning to feel like an obituary! I'm not going anywhere in a hurry, so please don't make me look back I prefer looking forward! It would be a dream come true to play just one rehearsal with Carlos Kleiber, I would also love to work with Simon Rattle, perhaps do a Strauss programme with Ozawa, do the Mozart/Del Ponte Operas with Harnoncourt, Mahler 3 with Haitink.... but above all, my biggest regret as an orchestral player is that I didn't get the chance to work with Bernstein before he died.

7. *Have you ever thought you might have preferred doing something different from music? And from the orchestra?*

It has been my dream to play in an orchestra from the first time I experienced the excitement of being a tiny part of that magnificent sound, aged 12 (Tchaikovsky 4th!), and every day I count my lucky stars that I have been fortunate enough to have my dream come true! Of-course, there are always some moments when one wonders what life in the "outside/real/muggle (have you read Harry Potter?!) world" would be like at different times, I have imagined myself being an architect, a lawyer, a full-time mother, a psychologist... but luckily I still enjoy the orchestra and playing music too much to give up on that pleasure for a while!!

8. *Was there any other art that tempted you? Any relation with the music?*

I love buildings and have already mentioned architecture but interiors I also find fascinating (what makes one room look empty and another chic & minimalist?) so interior design could also be interesting.

9 What is your favorite repertoire and why? In orchestra and in chamber music.

My greatest love in the orchestra is a Brahms Symphony all of them! I can't decide which is my favourite - I always love the one I am playing at that moment the best! He writes wonderfully for the flute both soloistically and in tutti passages - sometimes like a silver violin, often (obviously!) as part of a woodwind chorale, then occasionally like a light, high brass instrument. You have to be a chameleon. It is a challenge but one from which I never tire! It is also, for my taste, a perfect balance between cerebral and passionate! In terms of Chamber music, the Debussy trio has to be one of the most allusive works ever written for us. It is, for me, an enigma; he writes such specific detail on every single note, yet it somehow changes whilst sitting on the shelf between performances and always feels like a totally new piece every time I come back to it! I think the Ravel Chansons Madecasses and the Schoenberg Chamber Symphony op.9 (in the Webern quintet arrangement) are two of THE great works in our chamber repertoire.

10. Any idea of a project you had and you still have not carried out?

Many but there are only 24 hours a day and 7 days a week!!

11. You are not playing lots of contemporary music, is it a choice of taste? Too much practice (ah ah)?

Actually I feel that I DO play a lot of contemporary music and feel very strongly that every recital I give includes a contemporary work! I have had several works written for me the newest is a flute quintet by Errollyn Wallen called "All the Blues I see" commissioned by the BBC which the Brodsky Quartet and I will premier in early March. Contemporary music can indeed take a long time to learn if it involves a lot of extended techniques and new special fingerings, but to be honest, it is not so much a time limitation as a limitation of understanding I have to get inside the music and believe in it to make it work, and to be able to stand on a stage and perform it. It has to say something to me, and not just be "clever on paper" - I need to understand a mood, atmosphere, character.... something!! Life is too short to spend hours learning a piece which doesn't speak to me, because unless it speaks to me, I can't make it speak to the audience! Of course, the problem is how do you know what a piece is saying until you learn it? This is, for me, the great dichotomy of preparing and performing modern music and perhaps the greatest obstacle for composers in getting their music played. (along with the conservatism of programme planners!!)

12. Did you ever think you would have liked being a composer?

It has never crossed my mind!

13. Wouldn't you like to write yourself something to perform?

No, I think I am happier in my role as an interpreter!

14. Is there a piece written for other instruments and never played on the flute you would like to play and why?

I have made lots of (some scandalous) transcriptions over the years! Most of it has been of vocal or violin music which of-course lend themselves to being played on the flute. I was in a clarinet recital the other day and began to wonder about the Brahms sonata, but I think there are too many passages which wouldn't work very well enough.... who knows, maybe I'll try one day!

15. If you should choose to play another instrument what instrument would you choose and why?

My DREAM instrument would be a voice - the perfect combination of glorious music, ultimate communication, interpretation, language, acting... but Mother Nature has to be kind before you can even begin to study singing, and unfortunately my Welsh heritage didn't go so far as to grant me a decent singing voice! The HUGE chamber music and concerto repertoire that violinists enjoy must be amazing! Pianists enjoy more fantastic solo pieces and concertos than we can ever even DREAM about, but I think that life as a pianist would be too lonely for me! The cello is a wonderful instrument and has a fabulous sound, but I think the repertoire can't really compete with that of the violin. As a horn-player, one has many options - brass quintet, wind quintet, orchestras, brass bands, big, exciting brass orchestral tutti's as well as tender, beautiful solos, not to mention 4 Mozart concertos, Strauss Concertos, Brahms chamber music.... that would be my second choice of wind instrument!!

16. Is there any composer of the past time you would have liked to meet and work together? Why?

I think I would be too shy and intimidated to enjoy a proper conversation with any of the great composers from the past that I'd really like to meet! (Stravinsky, Prokofiev, Shostakovich, Schubert, Mozart, Brahms, Bach, etc not very original, I'm afraid!) They are probably best enjoyed by me now by reading about their lives in books and playing their music and trying to understand them in that way!

17. What would you have asked him?

One boring question but which interests me greatly; how do they structure their working day? They say genius is 1% inspiration, 99% perspiration....(do they feel that's true?) How do they structure this 99% perspiration??

18. Maybe why you never composed a piece for the flute... What would have suggested to him? Think about having a conversation with him.

For me, the big puzzle is why they all write so exquisitely for the flute in the orchestra and yet there isn't more better quality chamber music by "the greats"! Everyone understands that the flute as an instrument can be limiting for a composer, but had I met some of these guys, I'd have asked them to write more for mixed chamber music for example a quintet comprising violin, cello, flute, clarinet and piano is an excellent combination full of possibilities of sounds, colours, characters..