

Birmingham's "Other" Orchestra

Many years ago the magazine ran a series of profiles of professional horn sections. We plan to revive the series now, and will include sections from amateur orchestras. We start with the "other BPO" - the Birmingham Philharmonic Orchestra. Mike Wild takes up the story

The Birmingham Philharmonic Orchestra was founded in 1941 and has provided fantastic opportunities for horn players (and other musicians) to enjoy the same challenges as professional symphony orchestras; fantastic because of the completeness, competence and commitment of all sections in the band, the works undertaken and not least the organisation behind the scenes.

Membership throughout is fairly stable with players from all walks of life alongside music students who are beginning a career. The BPO requires serious dedication, but the rewards justify that. Rewards such as all of the Mahler symphonies, Richard Strauss's tone poems, Shostakovich, Elgar, Bruckner, Wagner, Rachmaninov, Sibelius, Stravinsky, Elgar as well as old favourites Brahms, Dvořák, Tchaikovsky and numerous 20th century composers. The BPO reaches places that other orchestras don't, often educating conservative audiences. There are 12 to 15 concerts a year, usually comprising 5 programmes with around 5 rehearsals prior to concerts. Rehearsals are a full 3 hours and the same length on concert day usually a full run through, so plenty of opportunity to build up stamina!

The success of the BPO was firmly established through the ambitions of Musical Director Kenneth Page from 1959 to 1986 and continued in the 1980s by Robin Page (no relation) who introduced a little more Scandinavian and contemporary music. From 1994, Michael Lloyd (formerly of English National Opera) has taken the band from strength to strength, allowing the members to have a lot of influence on programmes. There are guest conductors, some of whom have been able to add BPO experience to their developing career.

More information about the BPO can be found on the website (<http://bpo.org.uk/>) which includes details of the orchestra's history (<http://bpo.org.uk/a-history-of-the-bpo/>) and the orchestra's digital archives (<http://bpo.org.uk/digital-archives/>).

My memories of the BPO start from 1966. Rehearsals, Sunday morning (still the case) were at Digbeth Civic Hall where it was necessary to sweep up the broken glass from the previous evening's frivolities before we could start rehearsing! Fortunately, it was not long before the Great Hall at Aston University became a comfortable home for about 20 years.

Then, after a good while at the Birmingham Conservatoire, the orchestra moved to the University of Birmingham, where it performs regularly.

When I joined in 1966, Adrian Norris was Principal Horn. He was studying at the Birmingham School of Music (now the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire) before a long career with the BBC. The section at that time included a 4th horn who favoured a very traditional French sound which was quite a contrast to the rest of us. Another member of the team, a capable chap, played on a dowdy looking Alex. Apparently, it was bought new from the manufacturer in Mainz but to avoid the prevailing customs duty, he had soaked it in a bath of various liquids in order to make it look aged.

On 24 March 1968, there was a surprise deputy for the unwell first horn - no less than Jeffrey Bryant! I was on second horn and still recall his wonderful playing.

Later in 1968, Paul Farr (brother of trumpeter Land bandmaster Ray Farr and also a student at the Birmingham School of Music) became Principal for three years. Paul put in some fine performances before heading off to the BBC, the Hallé and eventually Norway. Paul provided the following words in July 2018:

I am still playing co-Principal Horn in the Stavanger Symphony, but have just over a year before retirement unless I choose to finish earlier. What an opportunity the BPO gave young musicians. I have great memories of really fine performances. A lot of those memories include you and David Cheshire back in the 60's, starting in the Midland Youth Orchestra. The BPO meant so much for the local musicians in the area during the late 60s.

It was a wonderful place to meet every week, with a super energetic conductor in Kenneth Page. I guess we all thought that he was a bit mad on Delius at the time, we can realise how much music we learned from him. We played some of the great pieces by Delius which may have passed us by. Fantastic music played by an enthusiastic group. When I arrived at my first rehearsal, the 1st horn (Adrian Norris) had just left and I was invited to take over. What an opportunity for a young person to step into. There was a fully functioning keen horn group, ready to play and have a go at anything. The standard was extremely high in the group and in

the orchestra, which made us all even more enthusiastic about being a part of the BPO. It was a great experience to perform bigger pieces as well the standard symphonic repertoire. The whole thing added to my development as a player, soloist and leader. Without this grounding I'm sure I would not have been as ready and able to face the outside world as a professional horn player. The BPO gave me the confidence to take on professional work at that time both with the CBSO and Orchestra Da Camera. I left Birmingham and the BPO for a position in the BBC Training Orchestra in Bristol and from there moved to London, playing on contract with the RSC, as well as freelancing and playing in Jesus Christ Superstar. A big move took me to the Hallé in Manchester for 16 years, before I took up my present position of co-Principal in the Stavanger Symphony Orchestra in Norway. Thank you BPO and the wonderful friends and colleagues in the horn group.

When Paul moved on in 1971, I became Principal, retaining that rewarding role and responsibility for 25 years. A feature of the BPO is the autonomy of each section. That means that when lots of horns are needed for works such as Mahler's symphonies, they were recruited by the Principal with help from the team. This is much better than the practice of using a fixer, who cannot be expected to understand all the qualities necessary.

Since the early 70s, the horn section has had flexible seating, with ability to play low parts a requirement. It's a comfort for a first horn to know that parts down the line will be reliable and supportive, otherwise it can be a worrying experience. Of course, there are optimum arrangements which are employed regularly.

Circa 1970, Richard Duckett (the author of Team Brass) arrived on the scene. His feedback from studying in London recommended Paxman Halstead Chidell mouthpieces, which were duly adopted. This was good timing as big orchestration works were being programmed. Paxman horns soon followed and the section throughout its reincarnations has largely

employed this make, although there is often somebody who has another preference.

The current BPO section all play Paxmans and this has been the case for a good while. It's a pity that many professional horn sections do not use consistent makes. Descant horns (or even singles) have never featured in the BPO; after all, nobody is risking their career. On the contrary, risk taking is feasible in the BPO and highly rewarding, but has not resulted in a cacophony of cracked notes. The worst thing that the horn section has done was to arrive late for a concert when *Ruslan and Ludmila* was in progress; the conductor noticed the crime when the harmony with the timpani was absent. He was not happy as we discovered before the next piece, *Till Eulenspiegel* (it went well I recall). Incidentally this was in a series of gigs that included *Pictures at an Exhibition* and the *Helios Overture* just to keep lips warm.

In 1996 I retired from the Principal role and have slowly wound my involvement down to zero. Martyn Jones became Principal, succeeded a few seasons ago by Tim Stidwill with Claire Dawes, Phil Dawes and Chris Collet forming the current section. Over the years there have been many stalwart members and several who have moved into musical professions including John Carvell, Jonathon Sutton, Jim Mildred, Tim Hill, Nigel Evans, Wayne Jeffrey (now a Professor in Canada) alongside guests such as Steve Roberts, Dave Lee, Pete Dyson, Nick Benz (who gave a memorable horn call in Siegfried's Rhine Journey), Gill Jones, Paul Sawbridge, Richard Clews (when a student) and Anneke Scott. Apologies for lots of omissions, my brain cells are slowly disappearing! I cannot have wished for a better musical experience than being in the BPO. I still attend the concerts and can confirm that the horn section and the whole band continue to provide excellent and exciting performances.

Mike Wild

If you would like a profile of your horn section to appear in The Horn Player, please email: editor@british-horn.org



BPO section probably late 1980s, a very serious rehearsal, no beer in sight. Martyn Jones, Andy Hill, Andy Hunter, Mike Wild (all Paxman)