

The British Horn Player Abroad –

in the latest of an occasional series, Chris Bishop describes the life of a horn player in South Africa

"You don't know me, but I want to talk to you about a job...". Music to any freelancer's ears.

In May 2007 I received a phone call from a horn player called Pete Griffiths whom I had never met and knew only as we were on the same diary service as London based freelancers. He mentioned that the Johannesburg Philharmonic Orchestra (JPO), now established as a full-time salaried orchestra, had spaces open for a 3rd and 4th horn. He was applying for the 4th job and he thought I should go for 3rd. Let me give you a little background, and the phone call and my subsequent application for the job won't sound quite so strange....

I had been freelancing in London for a couple of years and amongst my work with some of the major orchestras, and many minor ones, was a trip in early 2006 to South Africa. The JPO were in need of a horn player for a five week symphony season and in quite a roundabout way they had ended up with my number (JPO Artistic Director and principal oboe Gary Roberts went to school with my friend and accomplished London amateur hornist Andy Osborne). My trip was great fun and a great success. I played in all four horn chairs at one point or another and played guest principal with the

Chamber Orchestra of South Africa and the African Renaissance Opera to boot. I made many new friends and took full advantage of what I thought was the chance of a lifetime.

So Pete, it turned out, was planning to move back to South Africa where he had worked in the orchestra in Durban (now the KwaZulu-Natal Philharmonic) for several years. He had heard about the JPO auditions and about me, and decided to offer a little encouragement. Within a few months I had spoken to the JPO management and flew out to play another 2 weeks with them as guest principal (finally meeting Pete who played 2nd for the fortnight). With a renewed love of the band in my heart, I returned to London to record and post my audition CD. I was appointed as their new 3rd/1st Horn on 1st October 2007.

The once prospering orchestral scene in South Africa has been affected in one way or another by the changing political and social situation over the last 20 years. It would be very surprising if it hadn't been. Finance is always a problem in the arts. With such huge political upheaval working to move the post-apartheid country into the 21st Century it is obvious, rightly or wrongly, that State funding for a full time symphony orchestra

playing European art music might not, for many, be at the top of the budget list. Amongst others, the State Theatre based New Arts Philharmonic Orchestra of Pretoria and the Cape Town Symphony both closed, their members eventually merging into the Cape Philharmonic (an orchestra which also nearly didn't survive). The final victim was the National Symphony Orchestra of the South African Broadcasting Corporation, which was retrenched at the beginning of 2000. As the dust settled those ex-NSO members who hadn't already decided to emigrate or retire from the profession got together and formed the Johannesburg Philharmonic. By the time of my first visit in February 2006 the orchestra was performing 20 weeks of symphony concerts a year. Just 18 months later the JPO, alongside the KZNPO and the CPO became only the third full-time orchestra in post-apartheid South Africa.

Being a full-time classical musician in Africa is a world apart from Europe in some ways and exactly the same in others. In my first year with the orchestra I played for 26 weeks of

Below: Johannesburg Philharmonic Orchestra horn section L - R: Peter Griffiths, Chris Bishop, Graham McWilliams and Shannon Armer



symphony concerts, 3 ballet runs, 2 opera runs, 2 sets of pops concerts, around 30 education concerts, a bunch of corporate events, TV recordings, a Pavarotti tribute and a wedding (and had a wonderful 14 weeks of paid holiday!!!). That's just with the JPO. The freelance work available to us in Jo'burg includes the wonderful Chamber Orchestra of South Africa, performing only around 6 times a year. The Johannesburg Festival Orchestra and the Johannesburg Music Initiative provide the rest of the orchestral work in the province of Gauteng, regularly convening for public and corporate performances. There are festivals, film and pop recording sessions, lavish stage productions and TV programmes such as *Strictly Come Dancing* which also provide a large chunk of the Johannesburg freelance work, although not necessarily for the horn player!

At first glance it would appear that a classical musician in South Africa would never be short of playing, but the situation here is in fact a finely balanced one, with only just enough work for those in the profession. I've done my fair share with each of the orchestras and I even moved out here early to play a week of *Lion King*, but if I hadn't been allowed to share the winter run of *The King and I* with another player, we would have both lost out. Much of the freelancing is helping each other out, so that all the horn parts that need playing in Johannesburg at any one time can have a player sitting in front of them. It can sometimes turn out to be a very busy weekend! To put things in perspective a quick back-of-an-envelope calculation with my colleagues established that there are (we think) only 15 full-time professional horn players in the country. This includes freelancers and those playing for the major orchestras. (As an aside, we think the next closest pro-hornist may be in Egypt! Does anyone know for sure?).

However, if there were any more of us, those who rely on freelance work would struggle to survive.

Perhaps the biggest difference I have experienced since taking this position is that teaching is no longer a necessity for me. It was my freelancer's life-line in London. Teaching, with a few notable exceptions (I won't embarrass you by saying your name, Rachel!) was not my absolute favourite pastime in the UK it is fair to say. However, eager and studious learners are always an absolute pleasure. There are, particularly compared with the UK, very few horn students in the region. Of course, they already had teachers before I turned up! Being a newcomer has meant that I have been without students until very recently, taking on a University student and with plans to begin teaching the JPO cadets and the Air Force Band. Amusingly, this is still faster by a year than it took me to find teaching in London. Another huge difference is a purely technical one. With London being on average 20m above sea level and Johannesburg being at 1750m, breathing is considerably more difficult. Breath control and deep breathing must be constantly reassessed and maintained. (Due to the altitude difference it is said that it takes a minute longer here than in London to boil an egg, but I guess it depends how you like your eggs done!)

At this time I should say that sometimes you don't know what you've got till it's gone. Paxmans, on my doorstep, for every time a child kicks my horn off the chair, or my thumb lever comes off between the rehearsal and the gig, or even just because I ran out of oil ages ago and I sound more like a skidoo on concrete than a well lubricated French horn. I have to fly my horn to Cape Town for a decent repair (yes fly, it's around a 14 hour drive!). I miss Paxmans.

Anyway, back to the JPO. I am part of a wonderfully diverse orchestra with Americans, Canadians, English, Bulgarians, Russians and, of course, the majority are South Africans. Race. It's always a sensitive topic, but I can't write an article about this country and not say a little. To describe our orchestra in accepted terms that everyone here would use, we have around 15% black or coloured membership and the rest of us are white of European descent. I think, without any kind of accurate calculation, that this is roughly the same across the whole classical spectrum. We have a training orchestra which is over 90% black and the ratios in the profession will become more representative over time. Realise though, that we are playing mostly old European music, not the music of a new South Africa, so the current balance should not come as a surprise. Enthusiasm, passion and commitment are high and we all share a strong desire to make the JPO the best it can possibly be. We are all friends, we all go to the bar after the gig, we all socialise together outside of work and it is like a large family. This is something I never experienced on the same level in London. Because I was freelancing, I'd be with a different band every time, and such relationships are difficult to sustain.

Our horn section is not the best representation of the orchestra's diversity. Our principal horn, Shannon Armer, is from the United States and the rest of us are English! Shannon (playing a Paxman 20) studied in Ohio and New York before moving to South Africa in 1995, initially to play with the Natal Philharmonic. Graham McWilliams, playing 2nd on an Alexander 1103, left the Royal Academy of Music and moved here in 1976 to play with the Durban Symphony which closed not long after his arrival. After other positions, he eventually played as a

member of the NSO until it disbanded, and became a founding member of the JPO. Then there's me on 3rd/1st and Pete on 4th/2nd (both on Alexander 1035). Pete studied at the RNCM and previously held positions in Lisbon, Durban and Macao.

The JPO has no permanent conductor, but we are lucky to have a steady stream of visiting conductors and soloists, mostly European, who are all very vocal about their love of the orchestra. During our symphony seasons we perform twice a week to a bustling audience of around 1000. All our symphony concerts are recorded for broadcast on Classic FM and our repertoire is mostly what in the UK would be considered standard. The opportunity to play contemporary music here is sadly limited by an audience who struggle to accept even something like Sibelius's 4th Symphony into their concert hall. "New" music is not popular here! Having said that, there is probably no better place to cover the greats! Being an African orchestra, our link with indigenous music is always growing, mostly through the strong vocal traditions here with works like *uShaka ka Sengangakhona* by Mzilikazi Khumalo and orchestrated by Robert Maxym or the world's first Zulu opera *Princess Magogo KaDinuzulu*, combining an original libretto by Themba Msimang and music written by Khumalo, orchestrated by Michael Hankinson. (The latter work I played in Soweto for two nights during 2006 to an overcrowded 7000 seat church!). Thankfully the Artistic Committee are constantly pushing the programming boundaries. For this I am grateful as I absolutely LOVE playing contemporary music. I miss my memberships of the London Myriad Ensemble and the London Contemporary Music Group with whom I was lucky to play contemporary chamber works to such a high standard (and you

should ALL go and check them out in concert!).

Chamber music is also no longer part of my staple playing. The audience and opportunity is present though, and there is always quite a lot going on. The JPO section along with our timpanist, Rudolf van Dyk (also a great horn player on his custom hybrid HoltAha), play in a quintet called Highveld Horns and are currently recording a CD likely to be on sale at some stage next year. I have plans for performances of the Beethoven Sextet and the Strauss/Hasenöhr! quintet *Til Eulenspiegel einmal anders!* in the not too distant.

It goes without saying that I cannot wait to take the stage with my colleagues for our *Konzertstück* performances under Yasuo Shinozaki scheduled for February next year. My personal performance highlights since my arrival have included playing principal for both the Weber Clarinet Concerto No. 1 with Michael Collins (such a beautiful horn trio) and the fantastic *Schelomo* by Ernst Bloch conducted by Robin O'Neill (wonderful to play for the first time). Also Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique* Symphony with Micha Dworzyski, and Strauss's *Death & Transfiguration* and Rachmaninov's 2nd Symphony conducted by Bernhard Gueller. I enjoyed our performances of *Aida* very much, alongside a cheetah, horses and lions (but sadly no elephant, it didn't like the lions) with Vincent de Kort who regularly conducts the Gewandhaus Orchestra in Leipzig. Our pops performances with Coenie de Villiers have also been great, but you won't know who he is!

I couldn't be happier with my move here. It is hugely refreshing and motivating to be part of a great orchestra with such drive and ambition, based in a country constantly pushing for growth and development. I do however find it

odd to be in a situation where I can't really be in the audience for an orchestral concert (I'm always playing) without driving for at least 6 hours. When I want to get my fix I come in early to rehearsals and watch anything I'm not playing in that week. There seems to be a black hole here with regards visiting orchestras (any pros reading please have words with your management!) which is a huge shame and I'm looking forward to attending a few concerts when I return to the UK to visit. With the exception of this, my family and friends, and some less important things like decent Chinese food and Kronenbourg (and the lack of 24-hour licensing!!) I only really miss two completely opposite things about London: Public Transport and going for a walk. In Johannesburg, both of these things are unfortunately still not as safe as they could be. Thankfully transformations are underway and optimism is growing in all facets of life with the Soccer World Cup due to arrive in 2010 (for example, you don't buy "turf" here anymore, it's "instant lawn"!). I think I'll stay and watch!

Chris Bishop currently holds the position of 3rd/1st Horn with the Johannesburg Philharmonic Orchestra in South Africa. He gained his MA in Music Performance from the University of Southampton and completed a Postgraduate Diploma at Trinity College of Music, London before turning professional in 2005. His teachers have included Michael Murray, Jonathan Lipton, Frank Lloyd, Stephen Stirling and Roger Montgomery. Before his appointment, he played as a freelancer with orchestras and ensembles internationally and held the positions of solo horn with the London Contemporary Music Group, the London Myriad Ensemble and the National Youth Jazz Orchestra of Great Britain.

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