

A Musician's Life

Or

Rob's Ramblings



Robert Hinchliffe

There is one phrase which often crops up when describing musicians from the world of the concert platform; - that phrase is *"serious musicians"*. I have to say that, after forty years in the music profession, I've never actually met a serious musician myself! I have met some who took themselves very seriously, however. They were usually the funniest of the lot! This book casts a slightly whimsical eye over the various aspects of music in which I have been involved.

Over my forty years in music, I have been active in most aspects at some time or another; - especially in the areas of playing, conducting, composing and teaching. In this Ebook I will share some of my experiences, reminiscences and recollections, freely interspersed with anecdotes, stories and jokes accumulated in my travels through the wonderful world of music.

My oboe teacher, *Sidney 'Jock' Sutcliffe*, will occur fairly regularly throughout the book. Jock was a legend in his own lifetime, both for his oboe playing and his wit. There are so many stories about him it would be impossible to include them all. I have included a few where they seemed relevant.

Since completing my oboe studies at the *Royal College of Music* back in 1967, my career in music has been extremely diverse. From a summer season in Cornwall to a winter season in Iceland; from cabaret in merry Blackpool to touring in Cyprus; from conducting in the Royal Albert Hall to arranging hymns for the BBC's *'Songs of Praise'*; from teaching to recording; from solo work to playing in the pit; from composing to working in folk clubs; from chamber music to orchestral playing - I've done it all! I hope you enjoy reading of these wide-ranging experiences and have a bit of a giggle along the way!

Robert Hinchliffe

In T'Pit



The Devonshire Park Theatre in Eastbourne where I have been shoe-horned into the orchestra pit on a number of occasions

One of the situations that all musicians will encounter at some stage in their careers is that of working in the orchestra pit. The size, shape and positioning of an orchestra pit can vary enormously from a shallow, roomy enclosure in front of the stage to a deep, cavernous vault beneath it. In the latter environment nothing can be seen of the action on stage. Indeed, it is not unusual to be unable to even hear what is going on above except for the footsteps of large sopranos pacing overhead. One theatre in which I worked on a number of occasions had a pit like a narrow, deep crack in the concrete floor. The orchestra had to organise themselves more-or-less in two layers, with those in the lower layer provided with Davy Lamps and caged canaries!

When playing in the pit it is necessary to be permanently aware that on stage are actors, singers and dancers *with props*. Now props can range from silk handkerchiefs to teapots, or from books to swords. Bearing in mind that the musicians are positioned *below* the actors, the danger is rather obvious. It is very difficult to concentrate on playing when being peppered by broken crockery or concussed by flying buckets!

Any musician who has played in the pit for “*Fiddler on the Roof*” will have experienced the dangers of the bottle dance during the wedding scene. With several male dancers balancing wine bottles on their hats whilst performing a variety of terpsichorean gyrations, it can be guaranteed that at some time in the run of the show (probably several times) someone in the pit is going to get a surprise offering from above.

Two particular experiences from my career also come to mind. Firstly, whilst playing in a provincial theatre with the *Royal Ballet Touring Company*, we performed “*The Dream*”, a ballet which uses Mendelssohn’s incidental music for *A Midsummer Nights Dream*. The dream sequence itself took place behind a gauze curtain which gave an ethereal quality to the performance. On the night in question, the stage technicians were over-enthusiastic with their use of the smoke and dry-ice machines and a deep cloud accumulated behind the gauze. At the end of the dream sequence the gauze was raised and a bank of chilly and foul-smelling fog advanced across the apron and poured into the orchestra pit. The conductor disappeared into the mist and the players were left spluttering as they tried (and just succeeded) to keep going.

The second experience was from a production of “*The Vagabond King*”. At one point in the show the heroine, Huggette, was given the eye by one of the villains of the piece. Her response was to turn away and show her disgust by spitting. Unfortunately, she was standing upstage at the time and, therefore, each night spat directly

into the wind section of the pit orchestra. At the final performance of the run the poor girl was totally corpsed when she turned to make her gesture of disgust only to see a forest of umbrellas spring up before her eyes as the wind section took evasive action.

When it comes to pit work, I hate Saturday afternoon matinees. They are particularly irritating on lovely spring days. Whilst normal people are out enjoying the fresh air and sunshine, the pit musicians sit in a hole in the ground, in a room with no windows and attempt to give a performance to an audience of restless children, bored parents and dozing senior citizens. Children charge around the auditorium winging jelly-babies at actors and musicians alike. The jokes from the stage barely make it across the pit before falling with a loud 'splat' at the feet of the front row of the audience. The performances have all the atmosphere of a vet's waiting room. The last straw is the realisation that you have to play it all again in two or three hour's time at the evening performance.

Between the matinee and evening performance, many of the musicians will adjourn to the nearest bar to drown their sorrows and drink their dinner. One thing that can be guaranteed is that, after several drinks, the evening performance is rather more enjoyable than the matinee, at least, for the members of the orchestra.

One word of warning, however, when playing in many orchestra pits once you are in, you are in for the whole of an act. Over indulgence in the amber nectar before the show can lead to discomfort, even panic, as pressure in the bladder increases. I heard of one musician who became so desperate that he retreated to the back corner of the pit with an empty bottle as his only means of relief. Unfortunately, for a musician, he showed a terrible sense of timing. Just as he began to alleviate his discomfort, there was a long silence in the music through which the only sound to be heard was that of swiftly flowing water.

In many orchestra pits, the players are completely out of the sight of the audience and all sorts of things go on. It is not uncommon to encounter crates of beer in such pits and the performers on stage (who can see into the pit) are often fascinated by what the players get up to when not actually playing. I used to play regularly with a clarinettist who was retraining as a doctor relatively late in life and he used to come armed with medical books of one kind or another. Much of his studying was done between numbers in 'The Mikado' or 'South Pacific'. He also used to eat incessantly during performances. We once interleaved his part with Rivitas to keep him going.

Practical jokes of one kind or another also go on down in the depths of the pit *usually* un-noticed by the audience. On one occasion, however, the audience were very much aware of what went on when one of the woodwind section (not me, honest!) placed a Whoopee Cushion on the leader's seat. The chairs in the pit tend to be fairly basic and players often bring in cushions of their own for comfort. The Whoopee Cushion was put underneath the leaders own cushion. The audience applauded as they saw his head bob along beyond the front rail of the pit as he entered. He turned to the front and bowed in response to the welcome. As the applause subsided, he turned to face the podium again and his head disappeared as he sat. A loud farting noise rang around the theatre. The moment was further enhanced by a voice from the back of the auditorium, "You might at least say excuse me!"

Reading of books and magazines is commonplace and the literary content will often draw comments from the stage-performers during intervals. I once took a book about the pyramids of Egypt into the pit. This became a topic of conversation backstage for much of the week. Card schools also thrive and games of chess on miniature chess sets are not uncommon. Quite a bit of dozing goes on too.

There is a story of an opera company *bass trombonist* who used to enjoy a few pints during the interval. As he had nothing to play in the

final act until the very last few bars he used to sleep it off until the other brass players gave him a nudge just before he was due to play. This worked perfectly well and the other players knew exactly at what moment to wake him. All went well until they had a different conductor one night. As the final big moment approached the guest conductor looked over to the brass section to give them an initial nod to start getting ready for the finale. He was shocked to see the bass trombonist hard and fast asleep. He immediately gesticulated to the section to wake him up.

"Not yet!" whispered one of his colleagues.

More urgent gesticulations from the conductor followed.

"Too soon!" came the whisper.

Frantic gestures and fierce looks from the conductor ensued.

The second trombonist eventually gave up the fight, shrugged and prodded his sleeping colleague who rocked forward in his seat, whisked up his instrument and launched into the final rasping notes of the opera in the middle of a tear-jerking love duet.

My oboe teacher, **Jock Sutcliffe**, (*first mention!*) told a wonderful story of a Double Bass player who stepped into the breach at short notice to play in the pit band for a variety show many years ago. Being almost exclusively an '**orchestra**' man, used to the concert platform only, playing in such a venue was a novel experience for him and, frankly, he was rather out of his depth. Trying to follow all the cuts, reprises, transpositions, etc in the 'pad' he was really struggling to keep up. It just wasn't his scene!

One of the acts was an exotic dancer who worked with a couple of large snakes. No-one had thought to warn our hero that she also had a pet crocodile which plodded around the wide brass rail encircling the orchestra pit during her dance. In the middle of this routine the bass player looked up from his music to find himself looking into the rheumy eyes of a large and ancient crocodile. Shocked at the sight he gave the crocodile a firm smack on the snout with his bow, picked up his bass and ran, never to be seen again. As Jock said, "he didn't even come back for the money."

During a lengthy run with any show, a rapport tends to build up between those on the stage and those in the pit. If the audience are being particularly flat and unresponsive, the actors will often start to play to the orchestra where they know they will, at least, get sympathy for their efforts. One of the most rewarding things for the pit players in a long run is to watch the way the actors develop their characters, using and honing bits of business that get a good response and changing things that don't work. Keeping a show fresh through a long run is important to everyone involved; - on the stage, in the pit and, of course, in the auditorium.



Dressed up like a dog's dinner for a production of
"The Beggar's Opera

Have oboe - will travel



Amsterdam – one of the performance destinations with 'Collage'

The BBC Symphony Orchestra was on tour in Paris. Sharing the Principal Oboe seat on the tour were Jock Sutcliffe (*him again!*) and Terry MacDonagh, the two finest orchestral oboists of their day. As the orchestra prepared to begin rehearsing the *Silken Ladder Overture* by Rossini, neither of the two principals was in sight. As that particular work contains one of the most infamous and challenging solos in the oboe repertoire, John Woolf, the second oboist on the tour, was beginning to get decidedly nervous as he was faced with the possibility of having to fill in. As he sat there assembling his oboe and getting increasingly perturbed, a telegram was handed to him. He opened it and read, "*Regret detained Moulin Rouge. Jock and Terry*". In actual fact, Jock and Terry were both standing in the wings watching John Woolf's face as he read the message, - and enjoying every minute of their colleague's discomfiture!

Being involved in the music profession pretty well guarantees that, from time to time, you will find yourself on the move, either for a one-off 'gig' or for a lengthier tour or concert season. Sometimes these trips will be within the UK, some, as with the above story, will be to foreign shores. Having spent a winter in Iceland and a summer in Cyprus, it would seem that my timing and sense of direction were both at fault. Sensible people would have done it the other way round.



One of my first contracts after I finished at the RCM was a four month summer season in Cornwall. I was based at a holiday centre with the imaginative name of 'Sunny Skies', or 'Runny Skies' as we nicknamed it. My work there involved playing the guitar rather than the oboe. (Yes, - that's me on the left) I was a member of the three-man entertainments team. Between the three of us we did the lot. In addition to playing guitar, singing, playing a bit of oboe from time to time and generally clowning around, I quickly became one of the best bingo-callers in the South-West. They didn't teach me that at the Royal College of Music!

Shortly before the end of the season, I was offered the position of Sub-Principal Oboe with the National Symphony Orchestra of Iceland. I was allowed to leave Cornwall a couple of weeks before the end of my contract and headed north to spend most of the next year in Reykjavik. As one of my colleagues in Cornwall put it, I was to

become the only Eskimo with a suntan. The sensible swallows fly south for the winter; - this idiot went north!

This proved to be a very valuable experience, however. I learned a lot about the musician's life and even more about myself. The orchestra was funded partly by the state and partly by the national radio station. Much of our work involved doing recordings for broadcasting on the radio and television. We did one live concert, also recorded for radio broadcast, every two weeks plus various other odds and ends. We provided the pit orchestra for the **National Theatre** and, later in the season when the spring came and the snow started to turn green, we toured around doing a series of concerts for schools.

It isn't the cold which is the problem in the Icelandic winter, it's the dark days. Like many foreigners, I found those dark midwinter months very hard to cope with. About lunchtime in the depths of winter the sun would just about peep over the mountain tops across the bay, blow a raspberry and then disappear until about the same time the following day. In the summer Iceland becomes the land of the midnight sun (you can actually take photographs without a flash in the middle of the, so-called, night), but in the winter it becomes the land of the 'midnight moon'; - assuming the clouds clear away so you can see the moon! The Icelanders describe their country as the gateway to hell because it has ice on top, fire underneath and the devil's own language.

In mid-autumn, as the days began to get shorter and the temperature began to tumble, I decided to invest in one of the woolly hats that the Icelanders always seemed to be wearing. It was only on further investigation that I discovered that it was actually the way they wore their hair out there! (If you believe that you'll believe anything!)

At that time the population of Iceland was about 200,000 and about half of them lived in the capital city, Reykjavik. I had known the orchestra's Principal Oboist, Kristjan Stephenson, during my student days at the RCM as he was also at the Royal College studying with the same teacher, 'Jock' Sutcliffe, (already mentioned above). On one occasion Kristjan told Jock that there were only 200,000 Icelanders to which Jock responded (in typical fashion), "Is that all! It's a wonder you aren't all in zoos!"

When spending time in other countries, exploring the national dishes of that country is always an interesting experience. Much of the Icelandic economy relies on its fishing industry. Whilst living in Reykjavik I encountered many of the national dishes which, as a fellow Brit once said to me, is to discover 37 different ways to eat fish.

I remember a chat I had with several members of the orchestra who explained to me how some of the food is traditionally prepared. Just how accurate the explanations were I'm not sure! One of the greatest delicacies is shark. When the shark is caught it is first buried in the ground for several weeks. Apparently, the flesh of shark contains traces of arsenic and this process of leaving it to begin the putrefaction process removes that problem. By the time the shark is dug up again it is getting pretty yucky and rather high! It is then washed and the flesh cut up into little cubes. It is then eaten raw. I was informed that the tastiest bits were the bits that were so high it took real



courage to pass them under your nose *en route* to your mouth. I never had the guts to try this particular dish; - I can't think why! When food was spread out in a buffet, the shark always took pride of place in a sealed container in the middle. I always expected to see the dish jiggling about from time to time.

Another favourite dish was 'Sheep's Face'. According to my orchestral colleagues, the traditional way to prepare this was to lop off a sheep's noddle and throw it on the fire for a while. When all the wool and skin had been burned off, the head was retrieved and boiled. The meat was then carved from the face and eaten.

In other dishes, fish was dried, pickled, boiled, fried, baked, grilled, etc., etc. Despite the apparent sameness of all this seafood, many of these fish-dishes were imaginative and tasty.

When I was there, beer was not available as the government, apparently, considered that beer would be a corrupting influence in their society. There was a Pilsner available, which I think was brewed in Denmark, but the Icelanders tended to be rather scathing of that, describing it as 'gnat's water'. The alcoholic content was negligible. The Icelanders did, however, drink anything else they could get their hands on, especially in the dark winter months.

They have a national spirit drink rather akin to Schnapps. It's called Brenevin and it's powerful stuff. It is served in tiny little glasses about the size of thimbles. To watch someone take a drink of this dynamite in a glass is fascinating. The glass containing the clear liquid will be placed on the bar or table in front of the victim as he (*I can't ever remember seeing a female drink it!*) studies it closely for several minutes, sitting still as if in meditation as he psyches himself up. A look of resolve will then spread across his face as he reaches for the glass. With a sudden movement the glass is propelled to the lips and the head thrown back as the fiery liquid is gulped down in one go.

The drinker then grabs the edge of the bar or table with both hands. The knuckles go white as the face goes bright red. Steam issues from the ears as the hair crackles and threatens to ignite. The whole frame shudders for several seconds until the impact of Brenevin on throat gradually subsides. A sigh, part fulfilment and part relief, escapes from the lips of the imbibor. It certainly helps to dispel the winter chill!

After my season in Iceland it was about another four years before I was taken off again to foreign climes for a few weeks playing in Cyprus. This trip was to play with the 'International Chamber Orchestra of the Cyprus Music Workshop' which was a rather grand title for what was actually a 'scratch band'. It was just a short summer season of about a month or so involving some radio recordings, a TV documentary and a concert tour around the island. As it was the year before the Turkish invasion we were able to perform in both the north and south of the country. All the concerts were in outdoor venues including the ancient amphitheatres of Curium and Salamis, as well as at Bellapais Abbey and on the quayside at Kyrenia. The final concert was in a modern amphitheatre in Nicosia.

During the summertime in Cyprus the daytime temperature makes it extremely uncomfortable to play during the heat of the day. We used to rehearse at about 7.00am for a couple of hours and then return for more rehearsal in the mid-evening. The time in between was spent seeking shade and doing very little but sleep, eat and drink!

In the Mediterranean climate reeds were a major problem for woodwind players. Reeds that worked perfectly well in the UK changed beyond recognition in the height of the Cyprus summer. On one occasion, in the middle of a rehearsal session, I became so frustrated with the behaviour of my reed that I pulled it out of the instrument and hurled it across the room. There was an embarrassed silence for a few seconds before the whole orchestra erupted into

laughter. It helped to release my exasperation as I too joined in the merriment. I got out another reed which, happily, proved to be more suitable for the conditions than the first one.

For that particular excursion we could have flown quickly and easily down to Cyprus in less than five hours. Six of us, however, decided to make a real adventure of it and chose to drive down in an old VW Caravette. The journey, which took the best part of a week, took us through central Europe down to Istanbul. From there we drove the full length of Turkey right down to the Mediterranean where we got a ferry across to Famagusta. That particular experience, there and back, would warrant a whole book on its own, but I won't bore you with all that here.

One memory, however, does linger in my mind as one of the most extraordinary coincidences I have ever encountered. We were on our way back after the concert tour, about 20 miles south of Ankara on the flat central plain of Turkey and with the twilight beginning to gather when the fan-belt snapped. On checking the accessories we discovered that there was no spare fan-belt. The owner of the van remembered that he had decided to change the belt before we left, intending to get a replacement to keep as a spare, but he had forgotten.

Attempts were made to cobble a makeshift belt with a piece of thin rope without success. It was, by now, beginning to get dark and we were envisaging having to bed down by the roadside with the tents and seek help the following morning.

"There's a car coming," called one of our number. We looked south down the long straight road which crossed the flat featureless plain. We looked into the fading evening light to where he was pointing and we could just make out a distant speck coming our way. We had not seen another vehicle for ages and immediately we saw the possibility

of a tow up to Ankara where we would be able to get a replacement fan-belt the following day.

As the vehicle got closer it became clear that it was a van of some kind. As it got closer still we were amazed to see that it was a VW van. Indeed, it was another version of the Caravette which we were driving. We flagged him down. The engine on his van was identical to ours and, - yes, he had a spare fan-belt.

As I said, it was an extraordinary coincidence. The final twist to the story is that the driver of the van was having trouble with his headlights and asked if he could tail us back to Ankara, thus completing his journey home safely. We travelled in convoy for the 20 miles or so to the Turkish capital. Once there, he insisted on taking us all to his favourite restaurant where we were made a real fuss of by his friends and family. He even insisted on paying for all our food and wine for the evening. The whole episode was a truly memorable experience.

In my days with Collage Chamber Ensemble, we had two trips into mainland Europe, one to France and the other to the Netherlands. The instrumentation of the group was Flute, Oboe, 'Cello and Harpsichord. Having a harpsichord in the group and having no need for a piano opened all sorts of doors for us, enabling us to go where piano based groups could not. After a couple of hundred years in the wilderness the harpsichord has made a significant comeback in recent times and many composers are writing for the instrument again. It was rather sneered at throughout much of the 20th century. Sir Thomas Beecham famously described it as "sounding like two skeletons copulating on a corrugated tin roof, - in a hailstorm!" This is rather an unfair assessment, especially in the light of the massive repertoire of high quality music written for the instrument before the development of the piano.

It was on our first trip abroad with Collage that I became aware of a problem which cellists face in taking their instruments by air. Either they must allow the baggage handlers to deal with their cellos, putting them in the hold for the flight, which cellists are not happy with, or they must buy their instruments tickets to occupy a seat in the first class section of the plane. So, whilst the players sit in **economy class**, their cellos travel **first class**.

On one of the flights our cellist wanted a drink. In **economy**, apart from drinks served with meals, all drinks had to be purchased. In **first class** the drinks were free. Our cellist summoned the stewardess and pointed out that her cello was entitled to a free drink in **first class**. She further informed the stewardess that the cello wasn't thirsty and therefore could she have its drink. The stewardess refused to even consider the request. Our cellist pointed out that, although she was sitting in **economy class**, she was actually paying for the **first class** seat occupied by her cello and was, therefore, presumably paying for the perks that went with it. The stewardess still turned down the request. There seems to be something rather immoral about such a ruling, especially as cellos are not allowed to travel **economy class**.

It was on the trip to France, where we performed in a number of venues around the southern Rhone valley, that we discovered a big difference between the timing of concerts in the UK and the timing of concerts in France. In the UK a concert will begin fairly promptly at the appointed hour. In France the concert starts when the audience condescend to turn up! The publicised starting times in France would often be fairly late by our standards, - they were also complete fiction. Very often, when the starting time arrived the auditorium would still be almost empty. It was simply a question of being patient. If you wanted to play to a packed house, which we usually did on that particular tour, we had to wait for them to arrive.

The French day seems to be constructed around mealtimes. Evening entertainments and activities begin only when the evening meal has

been thoroughly enjoyed, savoured and digested. Only then can the thoughts be allowed to turn to what is to follow.

We found that the same thing applied to the midday meal. On our tour, about 3 days had been put aside for concerts in schools, - two concerts on each of those days. We would perform at one school in the morning before being whisked off to some wonderful restaurant where we were plied with several courses of superb food washed down with large quantities of wine. By the time the afternoon came, the last thing we felt like doing was another school concert.

Just one final reminiscence of our French trip; - in **Montellimar** (where the *nougat* comes from) we did an evening recital in the town theatre. The stage had a rather disconcerting rake to it. It tilted very steeply towards the audience. This, I'm sure, helped the audience to see very well what was taking place on the stage. Unfortunately, during our performance, one of the things they would have seen was the rather alarming sight of a harpsichord gradually walking towards them. The vibration generated by playing, caused the instrument to waddle down the rake of the stage. After each piece, our harpsichordist had to stand up and haul the instrument back to its correct position. It was during his performance of some busy Couperin pieces that the movement was most marked as the harpsichord got frighteningly close to joining the audience in the stalls.

Concert-ed Effort



Working with a Wind Orchestra at South Hill Park Arts Centre

Much of the musician's life takes place on stage in front of hundreds, even thousands of people. As with all the performing arts, the possibilities for disaster are far too numerous to mention here. Apart from the obvious problems of playing wrong notes, making wrong entries or getting lost, there are all sorts of ways that live performances can go wrong or, indeed, totally fall apart.

Equipment failure of one kind or another is fairly commonplace, like the concert pianist who, in the middle of a concerto, ended up lying on his back under a grand piano in his full white tie and tails fixing the pedal mechanism on the instrument. I, myself, suffered the

embarrassment of having my oboe reed split from tip to binding right in the middle of the obligato to *Jesu, joy of man's desiring*.

Percussion instruments seem to be especially prone to failure, like the timpani with a collapsed leg rolling drunkenly around the stage mimicking an escaped World War II sea-mine, or the large cymbal which broke free of its strap to go crashing down a steeply stepped platform like a rampant bacon-slicer sending the front row of the audience fleeing for their lives. The back desk of each string section is in permanent danger of being hit by falling music stands, accidentally kicked by wind players on the first rise behind them. As a wind player myself, there is a particular situation which we regularly encounter when accompanying choirs. The front row of the chorus will often be standing immediately behind us. It is quite hard to concentrate on playing with a copy of *Elgar's Dream of Gerontius* resting on the top of your head. (That's how I got my bald patch!)

I played in one of the opening concerts of a new high-tech. concert hall some years ago. Everything was state-of-the-art and computerised, including the lighting system. The main work in the concert was '*The Planets*' by *Gustav Holst*. All was going very well until we were a few bars into '*Mercury – the Winged Messenger*' when the computer decided to switch off all the lights in the auditorium. All went suddenly dark as the orchestra tumbled to the bottom of one of the scalic passages and ground to a halt, - much to the delight of the audience. Ah, computers! Where would we be without them? There was a time when we used to tell computers what to do; - now it seems to be the other way around!

Some orchestral pieces have infamously difficult sections in them. The openings of some pieces can be particularly challenging as 70+ players try to begin simultaneously. The tone poem, *Don Juan*, by *Richard Strauss* is a case in point. Often played as a concert opener it is notorious amongst both players and conductors.

One famous conductor was asked, "How do you start Don Juan?" The response came back quick as a flash, "Before the applause stops!"

William Walton's 2nd Symphony has a similar sort of beginning and has over the years caused more than its fair share of problems. With each of these pieces it is vital that both conductor and players know exactly what each is going to do or – "Oh dear me!"

In some orchestral pieces, composers add a different dimension to the performance by writing for off-stage instruments. There are the off-stage trumpets in Verdi Requiem, for instance, which are used to create one of the most riveting moments in the whole of the musical repertoire. In Mahler's 1st Symphony the opening fanfares are written to be played off-stage.

Probably the best known 'solo' off-stage effects are the distant trumpet in Beethoven's Leonora No.3 Overture and the plaintive sounds of the off-stage oboe in Symphonie Fantastique by Berlioz.

In a performance of the former, Leonora No.3, there is a much-told story of the trumpeter who took up his position just outside one of the doors into the auditorium. He was standing there patiently awaiting his cue when he became aware of one of the concert hall staff eyeing him suspiciously. He smiled and nodded to the attendant but received a frosty stare back. The moment came and the trumpeter lifted his instrument to his lips at which point the attendant came hurtling at him uttering the words, "'Ere you can't do that, sir. Don't you know there's a concert going on inside?" The trumpeter managed somehow to play the solo whilst fighting off the irate attendant. I am assured by brass players that this has happened on other occasions too.

Jock Sutcliffe told me of an occasion with the off-stage oboe solo in the *Berlioz*. The player has to wait through the first two movements of the work for his big moment. As the time for his solo got closer the player on this particular occasion felt the need to make a trip to the loo. As there was a Gentlemen's toilet just opposite where he was standing he popped in believing that he had plenty of time. **Wrong!** At the moment the audience should have heard the distant wistful tone of an oboe, the silence was broken by the less than ethereal sound of a flushing lavatory.

There is one much-performed piece which has developed its own folk culture; - the *1812 Overture* by Tchaikovsky. I played with a concert orchestra for a number of years during which time we performed the *1812* several times. In the concert hall where we did our concerts the maroons (explosives) were set off under the apron of the stage. The effect of this was that, with the firing of each maroon, the string section of the orchestra (who were sitting on the apron) bounced into the air. This greatly amused the wind section, who were sitting in relative safety on the main part of the stage.

There was a time when the maroons in this piece would be fired by one of the percussionists. Now, however, in these days of health and safety regulations, in many venues the buttons have to be pressed by technicians. What usually happens in these venues is that the percussionist sits behind the technician and slaps him on the shoulder each time a maroon needs to be fired. The percussionist has to anticipate slightly to allow for the reaction time of the technician. **The thicker the technician, the earlier he needs to be hit!**

On one particular occasion when the above method was being used the percussionist slapped the technician's shoulder for the first maroon. The technician duly responded and pressed the button.

“CRUMP!”

A huge explosion rocked the building. “Ooh, this should be good,” thought the percussionist and slapped the shoulder for the next maroon. The technician didn’t move. The percussionist slapped again for the next firing. Again the technician didn’t move.

“What’s the matter?” whispered the percussionist urgently.

“You can stop hitting me,” came the reply, “they all went off at once!”

At an outdoor performance of 1812, a line of several field guns from the local army unit had been drawn up behind the orchestra, facing away from the audience, - for obvious safety reasons. When the climax of the work came the field guns began firing in turn. Unfortunately this reduced the audience to hysterical laughter as, at that very moment, a flight of geese in V-formation flew across the evening sky directly along the line of the guns. It appeared as if the gunners were trying to shoot them down. What should have been a very impressive finale was reduced to farce.

Doing the clubs



Collage Chamber Ensemble in performance at the London Guild Hall
(c.1980)

Musicians may find themselves performing in a variety of 'club' situations at different times. These may range from music clubs to theatre clubs; from folk clubs to working men's clubs; from clubs that specialise in contemporary music to clubs that **don't** specialise in contemporary music; from cabaret clubs to drinking clubs; etc. etc.

The world of the '**working man's club**' is an area which would almost warrant a book all of its own. There are so many wonderful stories of these establishments, especially from a performer's point of view.

Years ago I did some work with a duo, '**Kent & Sarah Windsor**'. Their real names were Jeff and Sandy and in their early days of working

the northern clubs they simply called themselves that. At one particular club they arrived to be greeted by the concert secretary who showed them to their dressing room. "There we are. Tha'll be on in about 30 minutes for thy first spot," he informed them. "How do I announce you?"

"Jeff and Sandy," said Jeff.

"O right, Jeff and Sandy; - got it!" He disappeared to attend to other duties.

About 15 minutes later there was a knock on their door. It was the concert secretary again. "We're just about to start t'tom bola. Tha'll be on after that. What were thy names again?"

"Jeff and Sandy."

"O aye; Jeff and Sandy; - got it! I'll come and give thee a 5 minute warning." Again he disappeared.

About 10 minutes later he returned. "T'tom bola's just finishing. Tha'll be on in about 5 minutes. What did tha say thy names were?"

"Jeff and Sandy."

"That's it; Jeff and Sandy." Again he shot off.

Jeff and Sandy made their way to the wings ready to go on stage as the tom bola equipment was cleared away. Up came the concert secretary again. "All set?"

"Ready when you are," said Sandy.

"OK! I'll just go and announce you and you're on". They made their way on to the stage as the curtain was now closed after the tom bola. "What were thy names again?"

"JEFF AND SANDY!"

"O yes! I remember." The concert secretary went to his desk at the side of the stage and switched on the microphone. "Settle down now, ladies and gentlemen. We've got a reet good turn for thee this evening. I'm very pleased to be able to introduce to you, **Sam and Rusty**." The curtain opened to reveal Jeff slumped across the piano keyboard and Sandy leaning against a speaker both with tears of laughter streaming down their faces. It took them several minutes to compose themselves sufficiently to perform.

I did a little bit of work in working men's clubs myself, although not with a great deal of success. I can still remember arriving at the very first club I appeared to see my name up on a blackboard outside. **You really know you've made it when you see your name up in chalk!** The one club at which I really went down well was the **Artist's Club** in Blackpool. To be appreciated by other performers in such an environment was a great feeling.

I heard singer guitarist, Joe Brown, tell of one exchange he had with a concert secretary at one club where he appeared. He had arrived and gone into the auditorium to check out the stage, sound

equipment, etc. The room seemed to have very little resonance at all. He turned to the concert secretary. "The acoustics are bad in here," he observed.

"Aye, I know! But we've got the exterminators coming in next week!" came the reply.

In my years with **Collage**, we appeared at many Music Clubs (or Music Societies, as they were often called) around the UK. These were, almost without exception, happy and rewarding experiences. Performance venues varied enormously but audiences were very appreciative. The members of these music clubs tend to be genuine music enthusiasts who will give any style or idiom of music a fair hearing.

Collage commissioned a number of works from contemporary composers. Some of the pieces were fairly '**challenging**' for the audiences as well as for the players. At one music club, I think it was in Great Yarmouth, we performed one of these new works. The piece, which lasted almost 20 minutes, opened with a slightly '**blurry**' sort of phrase on the cello. This phrase was then picked up by the other instruments leading to a fairly extensive first section dominated by the opening phrase. This section finally led into a second section of different material. This material was then worked out by the ensemble. The piece then began to subside until the end seemed imminent at which point the original '**blurry**' phrase suddenly made a comeback on the cello. At this point an elderly lady sitting on the very front row sighed loudly and said in a 'stage whisper', "**O no! Not again!**" Somehow we managed to finish the piece!

Although not strictly speaking club work, **Collage** often provided foyer and/or interval music at such venues as the **Festival Hall**, **Fairfield Halls**, **National Theatre**, etc. This was rather an odd sort of a situation. Some people actually stopped to listen but many, probably

the majority, treated it simply as live 'muzak'. Sometimes we were seated in a clearly defined performance area, but in some of the venues we would sit with people quite literally milling around us as we played. It was not uncommon to have the chair bumped or get a whack around the ear from a passing handbag in these particular situations. I remember at one of them, just as I was about to lead in a new phrase after a pause, a man standing immediately behind me suddenly called out loudly, "Look! They're over there!" My oboe nearly went up my nose, - much to the amusement of my colleagues.

On one occasion we were part of a promotional display at a major Oxford Street department store in London. The store had a big springtime gardening promotion and we sat to play on a miniature bandstand in the middle of the display. At least we were in our own protected performance area. Apart from a mild attack of sticky aphids we escaped unscathed.

One of the most interesting music clubs at which we performed was at Burton Breweries. The old Tap Room was being developed as a concert venue and we were one of the first groups, if not *the* first group to perform there. During the afternoon rehearsal, each time we stopped for a breather a tray of free drinks would arrive. As the afternoon wore on, the rehearsal time shrank as the breaks became more regular.

Teaching: - In the beginning



"I, like, wanna learn to play rivvum an' lead, don' I," said the apparition, watery eyes glinting at me from beneath a thick fringe of matted hair.

This was my first experience of teaching. Having finished my 4 years of study at the Royal College of Music, I took on any work which came my way, including teaching for a music company in West London. Very little of my work there involved the teaching of the oboe, which was my principal instrument. It was my second instrument, the guitar, which brought in the majority of pupils. The above salutation came from the lips of one of these. Most, like him, saw themselves as eventually fronting an internationally acclaimed band, filthy rich and covered in nubile young groupies. At the time I encountered them they were just filthy and covered only in spots. It

was always a relief to encounter pupils who wished to use the guitar as a musical instrument rather than as an offensive weapon.

After that introduction to teaching, I had very little ambition to take my career in that particular direction. It wasn't until three or four years later that I discovered that teaching instrumental music could, in fact, be a very enjoyable and rewarding experience. Having said that, there were unquestionably days when I asked myself why the heck I had chosen to go down that particular route after all. But, happily, there were many, many more days when I became very much aware of the reason why.

My work in music education began way back in 1972 when most county music services were very much in their infancy. Throughout my 30 year career in that field I saw instrumental teaching turn from a very low profile and, at times, haphazard set-up into a highly organised and professional service employing high quality, committed musician/teachers.

The selection process for employment as a peripatetic instrumental teacher is now extremely robust and will often involve performance, teaching a group of children in front of the selection panel as well as a group discussion and individual interview. This will last for a full day; - in the case of more senior posts, sometimes two.

It was quite different when I began. I travelled down from Yorkshire for an interview in Reading. I stayed overnight in London and took the train from Paddington first thing in the morning for a 10.00am appointment. I arrived at about 9.50am and was whisked straight into the interview room. I was asked about four or five questions and then asked to step outside for a few minutes. About two minutes later I was invited back in and offered the job. I accepted and signed a couple of pieces of paper. By about 10.15am I was walking back to the station to begin my return journey. I got the impression that the

interview panel had decided I was the one they wanted even before I arrived. They just needed to see me to ensure that I looked fairly respectable and didn't have two heads.

But even that first experience was more formal than some I heard about. The best one was the brass teacher employed by the Music Adviser at a bus stop.

"Is that a trombone case?"

"Yes!"

"Would you like to come and teach for us?"

"OK!"

Now that's what I call an interview

Teaching: - The early days



As I mentioned in the previous section, back in the early 1970's, things in the world of instrumental teaching were far from ideal although some excellent work was already going on. This good work was often to be found in small 'pockets of excellence' and tended to be down to inspirational and hard-working individuals rather than a result of co-ordinated music service efforts as is usually the case today. Some local authorities had, by then, developed effective peripatetic teaching schemes, but, I think it would be true to say, that the majority hadn't yet got around to it.

The conditions under which many instrumental teachers were expected to work at that time were often appalling. In those early years, it was not unusual to be expected to teach in cloakrooms, even in toilets. One of my female colleagues had to teach at one

school in a boy's toilet. Throughout her lessons, boys would come marching in unzipping themselves only to freeze as they saw her there.

"Oh! Mmm! Ah!"

They would do a swift about turn and retreat zipping themselves up again. What alternative arrangements they made I don't know, but no-one ever could explain why the grass behind the bike-sheds kept dying.

Other outrageous places I remember being asked to teach at different times were:

- On a hall stage with a PE lesson going on the other side of the curtain. A really great environment for encouraging listening skills!
- In a school medical room. This was actually fairly common. These rooms were un-allocated and, therefore, in the eyes of the school, ideal for instrumental lessons. Usually fairly spacious and well lit, there was even a bed for the teacher to have a kip if a pupil failed to appear. All was fine working in such an environment until some ashen-faced child lurched into the room and vomited into someone's instrument case.
- School staffrooms and libraries were often used, especially in primary schools. Fine if no-one else needed to use the rooms, but invasion and disruption were commonplace. One issue with staff rooms was that there was often '*sensitive*' material posted on notice boards which young eyes should not have see! "Oooh, look at this, Natasha, Mr. Brightwell and Miss Epping have got the same address!"

- In a 'Youth Room', which was basically the social centre of the school. Invariably, there were no music stands available so music would be propped up on an open instrument case sitting on the snooker table. A strong odour of stale tobacco smoke and sweat tended to pervade such facilities.
- During the 1976 heat-wave, I had to teach for about a month in the cricket pavilion at one of my schools. The temperature was stifling. It was a case of pupils playing for 2 minutes and then going outside to get some fresh air and recover. None of my pupils actually fainted, but that was mainly due to my quick action when I saw their eyes start to glaze over.
- The opposite of that experience was the school where I once taught first thing on a Monday morning during the cold winter months. The teaching room was a *temporary classroom* (a 'hut' to you!) which had remained unheated for the whole of the weekend. The caretaker was supposed to put on the heating in there half-an-hour before I arrived but he rarely did. The result was that I regularly taught with the thermometer at zero or below. On one occasion the cold was so intense, the cork-grease on my oboe became so hard that I couldn't separate the joints at the end of the lesson. I had to take the instrument into the main school building to warm it up before I could dismantle it. *Yes, the joints on my oboe quite literally froze together.* One of my colleagues encountered similar problems and refused to teach in those conditions. The school could offer no alternative so he walked out. Believe it or not, he got hauled over the coals for refusing to teach, even though, by doing so, he would have been breaking the law.
- I taught in caravans parked in school playgrounds.
- On more than one occasion I taught in a greenhouse.
- I taught in school dining halls and kitchens with plates and trays crashing all around me.

- I had to put up with the stench of hydrogen sulphide in laboratory prep rooms.
- I had to cope with the gloom of boiler rooms and store cupboards.

One situation I never had to face, however, was teaching in the car; - but I know a clarinet teacher who did! He sat behind the steering wheel with his pupil in the passenger seat, music propped up on the dash board. I often wondered, - if a pupil's reed split, did he ring the RAC? Shame he didn't teach trombone; that would have been really interesting! I can just visualise the slide zipping in and out of the side window or sun roof. It would have been a fascinating challenge if he had been group-teaching at that particular school. The only answer would have been a stretch-limo.

The fact is that, at that time, when it came to room allocation, the peripatetic teacher was the lowest of the low. The caretaker had his room. The dinner ladies had their room. The cleaning staff had their room. The school dog had his kennel. The school rabbits and gerbils had their hutches and runs. We peripatetic instrumental teachers worked in the toilet, - if we were lucky!

One other rather fascinating aspect of the peripatetic life was, and indeed sometimes still is, what I call the 'Brigadoon Syndrome'! If you have ever seen the musical 'Brigadoon' you will remember that the village named in the title materialises for just one day every hundred years. There was/is a belief in many schools that peripatetic teachers materialise at the front door once each week to teach for an hour or two before disappearing into the mists of time. They would then cease to exist until their appointed hour the following week when they would once more materialise outside the school. The idea that peripatetic teachers actually worked elsewhere and on other days, or, indeed, even existed in the corporeal world away from their school, never seemed to occur to anyone.

To give an example of this; - say that my weekly visit happened to coincide with a school trip or swimming gala, etc., the school would send a message saying something like: "Because of a trip to Basingstoke sewage farm your pupils can't have a lesson on Tuesday afternoon. Please come on Friday at 10.15am instead." When responding to the message and explaining that I was working elsewhere on Friday morning it would not be uncommon to encounter real indignation from the school who simply couldn't cope with the idea that I had to be elsewhere instead of materialising outside their school on the Friday morning as instructed.

In recent years things have improved enormously. Peripatetic teachers are now (usually!) treated as the professionals they most certainly are. Most secondary schools have music practice rooms where lessons can take place, although the sound-proofing often leaves a bit to be desired. Primary and middle schools have areas allocated for music lessons and, generally speaking, instrumental teachers are treated as 'real' members of staff. How things have changed!

One regret I have from my years in instrumental teaching is that I didn't keep a notebook in which to record the excuses given by pupils for not practising. Some of them were mind blowing; -some reduced me to tears of laughter; - some just to tears! Some excuses were perfectly genuine and fully understandable, some were just ridiculous.

Some that I do recall were, believe it or not, quite common:

- "I couldn't practice this week because my Gerbil died."
- "I didn't have time to do any practice this week because the cat was ill."

- "It was impossible to do any work this week because it was my brother's birthday on Saturday."
- "I meant to do lots of practice this week but I forgot to take my instrument home from school after last week's lesson." (What about the other days of the week?)
- My dad's got a new job so I couldn't practise this week."

My guess is that most experienced instrumental teachers have heard all the excuses above plus many, many, even more imaginative ones. I so wish I could remember the really, really good ones which I heard over the years. I would recommend that any instrumental teachers reading this should start to keep a record. There's a book out there waiting to be written. You could eventually boost your pension by writing it!

Concerts for schools



Our local primary school

"Hello, children," said the Music Adviser, lurching on to the stage after a liquid lunch. Fuelled by too many glasses of the falling-down water, he misjudged where the front of the stage was and plunged over the edge to land on the front row of children.

The dangers of alcohol and performing have been well-documented over the years. As in the story above, even school concerts can fall under the influence. I have heard musicians in all sorts of situations come out with that gem, "I always play better when I've had a few pints beforehand." It is, of course, nonsense. They just think they are playing better. The audience rarely shares their belief.

School concerts fall into a number of categories. There is the chamber concert type of performances where a small group of players will go into individual schools. There are the larger orchestral scale concerts where the players take over a substantial venue and children are bussed in from a number of schools. There are recitals by individuals aimed at recruiting young players for particular instruments. Occasionally there are concerts where the music staff of a school or college will perform for both students and parents, - basically to prove that they can actually do it themselves.

I have been involved with many concerts in all these categories. Whilst working in Berkshire I was a member of the Berkshire Wind Quintet. Later I played in the East Sussex Woodwind Quartet. In addition to occasional evening recitals, both these groups performed in schools on a weekly basis, half a day each week being allocated for concerts in a couple of schools. Over a period of time we got around all the schools in the county.

Whereas we had a variety of repertoire for each of the groups I have mentioned, the format of each concert was pretty well identical. When you have done more-or-less the same concert several dozen times there is a real danger of slipping on to a kind of automatic pilot. You are effectively performing with part of the brain shut down. *This can lead to problems!*

There was once a peripatetic instrumental teacher who dreamt that he was giving a demonstration concert in the hall of a large secondary school. He woke up and found that he was!

Our clarinettist in East Sussex was once having one of these autopilot mornings. He had a couple of very young children at home and had probably been up half the night. As a woodwind quartet we would use the characters from Peter and the Wolf to demonstrate the four

main instruments in the group. When it came to his presentation he looked at the children through bleary eyes. "What animal does this represent," he asked. This led to total collapse of the other members of the quartet when, instead of playing the cat from Peter and the Wolf as expected, he played the **Pink Panther** theme which was actually the tune he used to demonstrate the saxophone later in his chat. When it dawned on him what he had done, he spent the rest of the concert with tears of laughter streaming down his cheeks, hardly able to play another note!

It was also in East Sussex where the 1st Violinist with the **East Sussex String Quartet** began their Monday morning concert by holding up her instrument and asking the children, "**What's this violin called?**" At least string players can play and laugh at the same time, an advantage not shared by wind players.

Christmas Music



Having been involved in music education for the last 30 years, I have encountered many *"interesting"* experiences at Christmas time. In primary schools Christmas tends to begin at the end of October as preparations for seasonal concerts and shows get under way. Secondary schools usually manage to put it off for a bit longer. However, with supermarkets stocking their shelves with Christmas goodies from the middle of September, there is a real danger that, by the time that Christmas does finally come around, the real significance of the season can be lost.

Almost everyone enjoys Christmas Carols and it is a well documented fact that a difficult class of Year 9 *'thuglets'* can be reduced to misty-

eyed submission by the singing of "Away in a Manger" or "Once in Royal David's City".

School concerts have over the years supplied me with many priceless memories, Christmas concerts more than most. Like the Music Adviser who, at the start of a concert, welcomed the audience, announced the first item and then dashed to the back of the orchestra to play the double bass. Unfortunately, in his haste, he collided with a 20 foot Christmas tree sending it crashing down on to the choir. The rest of the concert was, for me at least, somewhat of an anticlimax.

Another occasion which will live long in my memory, involved a local brass band who were accompanying the communal carols in a primary schools festival concert. The County Director of Music, who was conducting the schools items, announced a carol and asked the audience to stand to sing. The band played an introduction.

"Er, - excuse me," said the County Director of Music, "but *we're* doing Good King Wenceslas!"

"So are we," responded the band conductor indignantly.

I move away now from schools music and into the theatre. A favourite ballet around Christmas time is "The Two Pigeons". In this work two trained pigeons participate in the action by mirroring the significant moments in the ballet. I was told of one particular performance where the male pigeon lost interest and went off for a fly around the auditorium, dive-bombing both the audience and orchestra and leaving the female pigeon sitting alone on the back of a chair, centre-stage. In an attempt to lure the rogue pigeon back into the action a small handful of birdseed was tossed on to the stage from the wings.

"Food!" thought the pigeon and fluttered down to sample the seed. As he pecked his way around the smattering of birdseed he got closer and closer to the wings until, suddenly, a hand shot out from behind a flat and grabbed him. There was a flurry of feathers, a loud squawk and a muffled curse as the hand was given a meaningful peck. The pigeon escaped once again and set off on another circuit of the auditorium. At this point the understudy pigeon was sent on. This co-operative pigeon flew on to the back of the chair to join the female.

By now the ballet was reaching its conclusion. The dancers were performing the final reconciliation scene whilst the two pigeons nestled together on the back of the chair. The errant pigeon now became aware that his understudy had got in on the act. Seeing him snuggling up to the female, our hero obviously thought to himself, "Ere, that's *my* bird!" Without further ado he swooped down on to the stage to attack the understudy. As the dancers finished their big reconciliation scene, the two male pigeons were involved in a noisy and energetic altercation, squawking and pecking lumps out of one another.

I can't help wondering; - was the concept of this ballet the work of one of the world's greatest optimists or an idiot!!

Music Shops



This was my local music shop; - one of the good ones;
sadly no longer with us

The majority of music shops and music companies offer an excellent service. Many are run by musicians themselves; - people who really know what they are doing. The specialist companies are particularly helpful to both players and teachers alike. Unfortunately, as in most walks of life, there are a few '*rogue*' establishments out there. These dubious establishments are often manned by shop-assistants employed because they are good at selling rather than because of their knowledge of music or musical instruments.

For musicians, it is usually quite clear to us when we are being led up the garden path. For others, especially parents of our pupils, this is not always the case. This situation is often compounded by the fact

that some parents, sadly, seem to believe that the person behind the counter in a music shop is the expert and the instrumental teacher is a lesser being. This has led to all sorts of problems for many teachers and many pupils over the years. In the good music shops (the vast majority) advice will be honest and accurate and usually given with the proviso, "but do ask your child's teacher first!"

In my early days of teaching I came across one particularly dodgy establishment. Until then, my experience of music shops had been generally good. This shop was situated quite close to one of the schools at which I was teaching at the time. The shop-owner treated customers rather like Arkwright does in the TV show, 'Open All Hours'. Once their feet were over the threshold his aim was simply to get them to part with as much of their money as he could bleed out of them. What they actually wanted or needed had nothing whatsoever to do with any subsequent transaction.

An oboe pupil from the school near-by was developing well despite playing on an ancient school instrument. I recommended that the parents think about purchasing a decent instrument for their daughter to further help her development. Without consulting me about types of oboe or places to get one, the parents took the girl into the local music shop. You can imagine my surprise when the girl turned up at her next lesson with a flute! The gentleman (and I use the term in its broadest sense) had convinced the parents that the oboe was the wrong instrument for their daughter. If I recall he had 'advised' them that she was obviously finding the breathing difficult on the oboe so the flute would be a much better option. The girl struggled along with the flute for a few months making very little progress and ultimately gave up. Her heart just wasn't in it! Thus, thanks to the intervention of this music shop owner (who was a pianist, by the way) the musical development of a young girl who could have gone on to achieve a level of success on the oboe was blighted. He obviously had a batch of shoddy flutes which he was having difficulty shifting and saw his opportunity to unload one of them.

Another episode which showed up the deficiencies of some music shop staff was reported to me a few years ago by a clarinet teacher with whom I worked for a number of years. One of her pupils had purchased an expensive new clarinet from a local music shop. It always takes a while to get used to a new instrument and the pupil in question was having really big problems getting up to pitch. Different types and strengths of reeds were tried without success. Things came to a head during an ensemble session when the girl was about a semitone flat all the time. The teacher had a sudden blinding flash of inspiration, grabbed the girl's shiny new clarinet and held it up alongside one of the other instruments. It was significantly longer! The parents had been sold an A clarinet instead of a Bb version, - the 'standard' model.

The teacher accompanied the parents back to the shop to ensure that a correct replacement was issued. She explained to the girl behind the counter that the wrong instrument had been sold to the parents and requested a Bb clarinet to replace the A clarinet sold in error. The girl looked rather blankly back at her; "Why, does it make any difference?" she said. I don't know exactly what the teacher's response was but I'd love to have heard it! That young lady should not have been allowed within 100 metres of a music shop let alone be behind the counter dealing with customers.

The first silly (but true) story I ever heard about a music shop assistant dates back to my school days. The school play that particular year was a production of The Taming of the Shrew. In the opening scene, a hunt is heard in the distance. The school geography master was in charge of stage management, etc. and, knowing that sound-effects records were available, he visited the largest music shop in the town to try to purchase one with appropriate sounds on it.

He approached the young lady at the record counter.

"Do you have a recording of the baying of hounds?" he asked hopefully.

He received a totally blank look from the shop assistant. "Yer wha'?"

"I need a recording of the baying of hounds!"

He looked into the girl's eyes but the blinds were drawn.

"The sound of the baying of hounds," he persevered.

Suddenly, the girl's face lit up and she responded with enthusiasm. "Is it in the charts?" she asked.

Exit geography master stage left.

The great outdoors



There is only one thing I can think of which is worse than playing outdoors and that is playing in a tent! At least in the middle of a field, the sound can bounce back off the occasional tree or cow. In a marquee the canvas walls simply absorb all vibration with a "slurp". I remember attending a recital in a marquee given by the excellent [London String Quartet](#). Not only was there a total lack of resonance, but, being a breezy day, there was a background noise of flapping canvas and slapping guy-ropes. As the quartet held the final quiet chord of a slow movement, [Carl Pini](#) turned to the audience: "Can anybody hear us?" he asked. There was no response as nobody could hear him!

All players, regardless of instrument, will at some time in their lives be asked to play in the open air. The first problem is contained in the

phrase *"open air"*, - because air moves. Even a mere zephyr of breeze will whisk a sheet of music off a stand. Musicians arrive for outdoor events with pockets full of clothes-pegs with which to clip the music to their stands. Portable music stands, however, are notoriously light and unstable and fixing a sheet of music to the top of one of these is akin to running a sail up a mast. Not only does the wind grab at the music it sends the stand flying too. Ideally, those who book players for outdoor performance should provide tungsten steel stands set into metal 'godfathers' secured in a concrete base and laid out to the requirements of the ensemble involved. The top of the stand should consist of an aluminium box (like a shallow bathroom cabinet) with sliding glass doors at the front to keep the music dry and out of the wind yet enabling the player to read it clearly and able to access it for page turns. For wet days, windscreen wipers would be a useful addition.

It was said many years ago that a fortune awaited the first person to invent the perfect mouse trap. I would say that the same applies to the pursuit of the perfect music stand. Some are, unquestionably, better than others but perfection is a long way off! The perfect stand would be sturdy yet light enough to be carried with ease. It would fold into a small package and yet, when erected, it would be impossible to knock over. It would be impossible to bend, especially when required for use in schools. The wing-nuts would be made of anti-jamming material with screw-threads of titanium. It would be easily adjustable and have built-in clips for securing music for outdoor use. An optional extra might be a detachable spike at the bottom which could be driven into the ground for breezy performances in the open air.

In the UK, wind is not the only problem with outdoor performance. It has been known to rain here from time to time, - even in summer. (Perhaps I should say particularly in summer!) After a scorching hot June week in which everyone looks forward to the village fete, come Saturday the clouds will roll in, the heavens open and February returns for the day.

On these occasions the *contingency plan* is put into operation. This usually means that everything, including the music group, ends up either in a dreaded marquee or crammed into the local village hall or church centre where there is not enough room to swing a piccolo player, let alone a cat! The acute congestion results in the conductor flooring the mayor with a right-hook as he brings in the tuba-player and the principal trumpet being given away as first prize in the raffle.

Other issues with outdoor performance include:

- The re-routing of the local flight-path directly over the performance site.
- The public address system which suffers a case of terminal feedback just as the music starts.
- The pub across the road blasting out pop classics of the '80's (*there were a couple, if I recall*) just as the performers begin their rendition of 'Nimrod'.
- Cyril, the donkey, breaking wind very loudly as he wanders past with a child on his back. (*Have you ever heard a donkey break wind in a confined space? It's awesome!*) On these occasions the clothes pegs in the pocket have a secondary use.
- The players' chairs beginning to subside as the legs start to sink into the soft turf.
- The arrival of a flock of pigeons or seagulls with loose bowels circling the performance area using the players for target

practice. (1 point for a tuba player; 3 points for a clarinettist, 10 points for a piccolo player; etc.)

- Children doing all kinds of distracting and horrible things. (*The list is far too long and far too revolting to itemise here*)
- The conductor having to fight off a drunken guest who is trying to get directions to the beer tent during a performance of "633 Squadron".

I'm sure that all those who have been involved in outdoor performance can add their own particular nightmares to this list. If you have any good ones, I'd love to hear them.

Another situation which musicians may well encounter is providing incidental music for outdoor drama productions. Sometimes this will entail playing whilst hidden in the shrubbery, sometimes (*horror of horrors*) in full view of the audience and dressed up like a dog's dinner. There always seems to be an element of 'creeping around' in this kind of production because the producer will want the music to come from different places at different times. The musicians may begin on stage for a fanfare to open the play before disappearing backstage to crawl along behind a hedge, tiptoe doubled up behind a low wall and plunge through a holly bush before providing off-stage music for the entry of the hero about 47 seconds later - stage right. Then it's back through the holly bush, across some stepping-stones and up a ladder into a tree house, stage left, for the arrival of the heroine.

Worse still, the players may be asked to perform on a punt in the middle of an ornamental lake in front of the stage. One bit of advice, if asked to do anything like this feign illness, plead insanity, claim a death in the family, (*if none of your family have died - kill one of*

them), anything to avoid doing it! That great solo oboe piece "Six Metamorphoses after Ovid" by Benjamin Britten, was first performed from a boat by Joy Boughton. I'm sorry to say that the boat neither broke its moorings and drifted off into the sunset, nor did it sink; - shame really!

I remember being one of a group of about 5 musicians providing music for an outdoor Shakespeare production performed in the ruins of an old abbey. One of our number was an earnest young flautist who also provided a few simple percussion effects. One of these was the sounding of an Elizabethan doorbell, "Bard of Avon calling!" (*Sorry!*) He got terribly worked up about this, paranoid that he would miss the cue.

"You will tell me when," he kept saying as he wandered around behind the abbey walls, large tubular bell in one hand, mallet in the other. As the moment got closer he seemed to get more and more agitated. His pacing became quicker and his pleas to not let him miss the cue even more feverish. Finally, the moment came. The MD gave him the cue with a big arm gesture. The earnest young player almost triumphantly raised the tubular bell and hit it firmly with the mallet. The string broke and the bell fell on his foot. The single clang became a succession of clangs, followed by muffled cursing from the earnest young player and hysterical laughter from the other musicians. There was supposed to be a short musical interlude immediately afterwards. It never happened!

The week after the Henley Regatta it was decided to keep all the marquees and temporary restaurants, etc. in place and hold a music festival on the same site. *Collage Chamber Ensemble*, with whom I played for many years, took part in the very first one back in 1984. The climax of the festival was to be a performance by one of the top London orchestras, I think it was the *RPO* but I may be wrong. The bright idea was to turn around the floating grandstand used for the regatta so that it faced the bank instead of the river. The orchestra

would then perform on that under stage lighting. The audience would sit on the bank with their hampers of food and drink. Great idea!

The afternoon rehearsal went well and all seemed set fair for the evening. Unfortunately, there was a problem which no-one had envisaged. Picture the scene; - dusk by the river on a warm June evening; an orchestra of 60 or so players sitting on the floating grandstand bathed in powerful floodlighting; arrival of five-and-a-half million mosquitoes who just couldn't believe their luck. "Yum-yum! It's supper-time, guys!"

[There were two flies on a piece of music. One said to the other, "Did I tell you about the time I moved and wrecked a whole symphony?"]

Army bandsmen, of course, are regularly involved in outside playing in one situation or another. I have terrific admiration for the way they can keep playing (and playing well) whilst performing all sorts of counter-marching and complicated choreographed routines. I remember a bandsman from the Irish Guards once explaining to me a manoeuvre known as a '*spinwheel turn*' where a whole marching band goes round a 90 degree corner. (Watch '*Trooping of the Colour*' to see this done) It is difficult enough without an instrument. To do it whilst playing must be a bit like tap-dancing on a trampoline whilst juggling jelly.

Oboist and reed-maker, Harry Baker, (sadly, no longer with us) told me a couple of stories about his days with the Royal Artillery Band during the war years; - not the 'Great War' but the 1939-'45 replay with Vera Lynn. The bandmaster at that time seems to have been a rather interesting gentleman, to put it mildly.

After the liberation of Europe the band were based for a while in Belgium. One foul day in the middle of winter the bandmaster

decided that the band would go out into the town square to play to the liberated Belgians, - whether they wanted to be played to or not! The whole band kitted themselves out in full regalia with large gas-capes to keep out the great sheets of rain which were sweeping across the town. The band were duly formed up in the middle of the square all set to play.

Now, Harry's oboe was a very valuable instrument which had been presented to him as the outstanding student of his year during his time at Kneller Hall, the Royal Military School of Music. He was, not surprisingly, unwilling to expose the instrument to such awful conditions when, as he pointed out to the bandmaster, there wasn't a Belgian in sight. The locals were, very sensibly, snug and warm in their homes. Harry was hauled out in front of the band where a band-sergeant ordered him to get out his oboe. Harry refused. A second band-sergeant was summoned. Still Harry refused. Then a third band-sergeant got in on the act. Harry stuck to his guns.

The image this conjures up to me is one that the great cartoonist, Giles, would have depicted so beautifully. A wet, grey town square totally devoid of human presence other than the RA Band. Harry, a short, slightly dumpy figure, standing defiantly and alone at the front of the band with three large band-sergeants towering over him. Wonderful! I'd love to have seen it. There are also echoes of "Sam, Sam, pick oop thy musket", if you know that particular monologue. Not surprisingly he ended up on a charge, but he reckoned that it was worth it to protect his special oboe. These days, I am told, most bandsmen have a 'good' instrument for indoor playing and 'cheap' ones for outdoor work to avoid exactly this kind of incident.

Some time before that particular occasion, when the war was still in full swing, the same bandmaster decided that the band was not getting sufficiently involved. So, armed only with musical instruments, he had all the players sent across a river in an amphibious assault craft to play to the British troops as they attacked

enemy positions on the far bank. They set up in an orchard and, with shells whistling overhead, proceeded to play stirring patriotic music to the attacking infantry. All was fine until the Germans fought off the British assault and made an incisive counter-attack. The band escaped by the skin of their teeth, getting back across the river in one of the last amphibious craft to make the return trip.

At least, musicians playing at village fetes don't have quite those kinds of problem!

Any Other Business



In this final section I have gathered together a number of anecdotes which I wanted you to read but which I couldn't really fit into any of the earlier chapters.

The podium at many concert halls has a detachable rail around it to restrict the conductor to a safe area of operation. I heard of one conductor who, when asked whether he wanted the rail on or off, announced with great bravado that he would perform without it. It reminds me of Burt Lancaster in the film "Trapeze" announcing, "No net" as he cut the ropes of the security netting. The inevitable happened! During the performance the conductor got carried away took a large step back and vanished. The last the orchestra saw of him was the soles of his shoes as he plunged backwards into the front row of the audience breaking his collar bone in the process. The orchestra leader had to take over the baton for the rest of the concert.

No book on music and musicians could possibly be complete without at least one viola joke, so here it is; - my favourite!

An orchestra went on a six-week foreign tour under the baton of a famous conductor. The first concert went according to plan but, on the following day, the famous conductor fell seriously ill. The orchestral management immediately set about finding a replacement conductor for the rest of the tour. After a couple of days searching and with the next concert only 24 hours away they had drawn a blank. At the rehearsal on the day of the concert the orchestral manager got up on the podium and explained the situation to the players, ending his talk with a desperate appeal, "Is there anyone in the orchestra who feels that they could stand in to conduct this evening's concert?"

A hand went up from the back desk of violas. As there seemed to be no other option the viola player was invited forward to take the rehearsal. The rehearsal went extremely well and both players and management were very pleased with the session. Everyone went optimistically into the evening performance which was a huge success. Indeed, the performance received such a terrific response from the audience and such rave reviews from the press that the viola player was asked to continue as conductor for the remaining concerts of the tour.

The whole tour was a roaring success as the viola-player/conductor wowed audiences with his interpretation and greatly impressed his orchestral colleagues with his musicianship and conducting skills bringing the very best out of them in performance.

Just before the final concert of the tour, the famous conductor was released from hospital and rejoined the orchestra. He was contracted to the tour and wished to conduct the final concert so the viola player

was thanked effusively by his colleagues before returning to his seat on the back desk at the next rehearsal.

As he took his seat, his stand-partner welcomed him back. "Hello, mate!" he said, "nice to see you back, but where the heck have you been for the last six weeks?"

I end my book with what is probably my very favourite musical story of all time. It concerns my former teacher, [Jock Sutcliffe](#), to whom I have referred several times already. There are a number of versions of this tale floating around, but this is the version told to me by Jock's eldest daughter.

When Jock was in his hay-day, he was involved in a two-day recording session with a fellow oboist who was going prematurely bald. The musician in question was very sensitive about his thinning locks and decided to invest in a toupee. On returning home from the first day of the session, the follicly challenged oboist discovered that his new hairpiece had arrived in the post during the day. He pondered long and hard as to whether he should begin wearing it immediately. Finally, he decided to grasp the nettle and to wear it for the second day of the session.

Knowing what musicians are like, he feared an onslaught of sarcasm and leg-pulling about his new wig. His fears were unfounded, however, and the session went well without one single jibe. As the players were packing up at the end of the day Jock turned to his newly hirsute colleague and praised his playing in glowing terms.

"What a delight to work with you;" said Jock, "such sensitive playing. I really have enjoyed the session so much. Thank you for making it such a pleasure." The bewigged oboist preened himself before such effusive praise from the great man. Jock then leaned towards him in

a slightly conspiratorial fashion; "I'll tell you something," he said, "you're much better than that bald bugger we had yesterday." (Total collapse of wind section!)

Robert Hinchliffe



I hope that you have enjoyed your guided tour of my musical life and experiences. Please visit my website at:

www.hinchliffe-music.com

Watch this space for further ramblings
Robert Hinchliffe