

ADAM WHONE

Incorporating **WITHERS**
NEWSLETTER June 1999



Vn bow by A. Lamy

Welcome to this spring newsletter, our second from Mill Hill Road and the fifth since we started its publication at Withers. Now that an air of normality has descended (if there is such a thing), we have not only more capacity for work but an ever-increasing selection of fine instruments and bows to suit all requirements whether you are a student, chamber, orchestral or solo artist. Talking of orchestras, it came to mind that a little light relief from some of the crises in recent years might be in order. Read on to be surprised, amused, dumbfounded or just resigned to it all!

LIFE IN THE ORCHESTRA - *has anything changed in nearly five decades?*

In 1951, my father, Herbert Whone, was playing violin in the Covent Garden Orchestra. During his time there he became involved in the writing of a book entitled *Mud from a Scraper* (or *Give Me Excess of it*), by viola player Jeremy White. Jeremy wrote the text, and my father (who has always held a dual artistic career) contributed the cartoons. It was intended as a humorous (and rather tongue-in-cheek) insider's view of orchestral life and one which would have struck a lively chord with anyone who had read it at the time, but for the fact that just before it was due to be printed the owner of the publishing company died. Therefore so did the book.

Half a century on, and with the willing consent of both authors, over the next few newsletters I shall have pleasure in sharing with you excerpts hitherto sadly denied to the world. Whether the book will fully see the light of day is another matter, but it certainly gives a remarkable angle on the profession as it was and suggests that life for an orchestral musician can on occasion be nearer the comedy stage than the musical one.

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It may be interesting to see if anything has changed in the last 50 years! You may have to excuse the rather frequent use of the words 'men' and 'he': at the time of the book's writing, it really was not common for women to play in major orchestras.

Adam Whone

'MUD FROM A SCRAPER'

(or *Give Me Excess of it*)

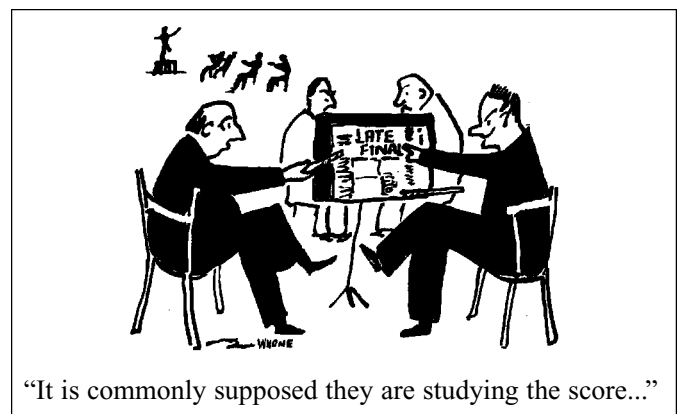
Chapter 1 (excerpt)

INTRODUCING MUSICIANS

The Mystery of Music is Seldom realised by those who easily accept its gifts (Evelyn Underhill)

Every orchestral player, so scenario-writers would have you believe, carries a conductor's baton in his case. This is not true: open any instrument case in any band room at any time, and you will find a near-black bow tie, seven old assorted programmes, an out-dated Irish Sweep ticket, a bag of sandwiches, and a dirty duster.

You may or may not discover an instrument of some sort, but there will be no more sign of a conductor's baton than of a poached egg. Probably less.



"It is commonly supposed they are studying the score..."

There is a great deal of romantic nonsense written about musicians. Novelists endeavour to convince the public that members of the profession wear an air of glory, and manage to infuse into their most mundane activities a spirit of romance and adventure that is denied other mortals. A musician's life is, in reality, as prosaic as any; there is no more glory attached to it than to the lot of a shop assistant, and no more adventure than to the peregrinations of a commercial traveller.

The concert-goer is, perhaps, more deluded than one who knows less about music. After weeks of happy anticipation he listens, entranced, whilst sixty men in black jackets play his favourite symphony. It is only natural that he should place these far-off beings, who probably only visit his town once a year, on a mental pedestal, and imagine that if they do have the same sordid necessities and vices as the rest of the species, they at least forget about them whilst they are playing for his benefit.

The concert-goer also holds the idea that musicians play chamber music in all their leisure moments, and that they are too ethereal to be interested in the activities which are his own worldly lot. The opposite view is also widely held; that musicians play poker whenever off duty, and are too sharp to admit that they are on an easy racket. The two opinions, in a nutshell, are that musicians are either long-haired or bald. Some of them are, of course, but never at the same time.



Far from forgetting their human weaknesses when they come onto a platform, many orchestral players take advantage of the conversation-free duration of a concert to indulge in day-dreams which are neither uplifting nor creditable, and which nobody unaccustomed to taking similar opportunities for

such fantasies would ever suspect existed from the spirituality of the orchestra's playing. This in no way, however, detracts from the excellence of the performance, because no one feels himself free to relax sufficiently unless the music is well under control.

During a concert, wind players can often be seen studying things on their stands when they are tacet in a movement of a large work. It is commonly supposed they are studying the score, or working out fingerings for awkward passages. This is a misconception: when such an opportunity presents itself, a musician meditates on racing form, does a crossword puzzle, reads *Razzle* or fills in his football coupon.

Similarly, when an orchestra comes onto the platform and awaits the entrance of the conductor, pairs of musicians can often be seen fingering their instruments and cowering nervously behind their stands. Many people imagine that they are discussing the programme, and comparing their prowess on technical passages. The fact of the matter is that they are fingering their instruments by a purely reflex action, and talking about American Blight, the latest exposure meter, and what young Adrian said at breakfast.

The first thing a player does when he comes onto the stage, having ascertained that he has the best available chair and sufficient room to play, is to examine the audience to see if there are any pretty girls, acquaintances, critics or fixers in it. This is known in the profession as 'talent spotting'. Should a choir be participating in the programme, it will also be searched for presentable young females, but usually in vain.

Having seen an acquaintance, a musician will use him or her to enhance his prestige with his colleagues by pointing him out and exaggerating his merits and the occasions on which they met. His playing will be somewhat better than usual, because a personal audience is more encouraging to the ego than one composed of strangers.

Should a player spot a critic, he will warn everyone in the orchestra, and by accusing glares endeavour to place all the blame for the performance on the conductor. Fixers are seldom seen in any concert hall, but when such a thing happens, the player who notices one keeps the information to himself, and plays as he has never played before.

(to be continued) - all complaints to the management.

(Jeremy White) followed a distinguished career playing in such well known orchestras as the RPO under Sir Thomas Beecham and as leader of the viola section at Covent Garden for over 30 years. He now plays as a freelance musician and with the Leonora Ensemble. **Herbert Whone** has played in various orchestras, including post as sub-principal in the SNO. He gave up orchestral life for a teaching career whilst continuing his love of painting, and amongst other publications is well known for his highly regarded book *The Simplicity of Playing the Violin.*)

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THE BEKOVA SISTERS TRIO

With Alfia Nakipbekova

When, in 1981, cellist Alfia Nakipbekova arrived in the UK from Kazakhstan in the USSR on a cultural visit, she took the very bold decision to request political asylum here. Alone and in a strange country, for all Alfia knew she might never have seen her family or homeland again. Gorbachev had not yet made his far-reaching changes and Glasnost was yet to influence the world scene.

Back in the former Soviet Union Alfia had been a member of the highly acclaimed Nakipbekova Sisters Trio together with her two prodigiously talented sisters, Elvira and Eleonora (violin and piano respectively). The sisters had studied at the Moscow Conservatory of Music (Alfia with Mstislav Rostropovitch) and each was as accomplished a soloist on her given instrument as she was a member of the trio. I asked Alfia how hard it had been to make the decision to leave Russia and what had driven her to do it. "I think the main reason I left Russia was lack of opportunity

and freedom of movement. You know, for a creative person it's difficult to put up with restrictions. But it was also very difficult to leave because our family is very close knit - actually, I was more worried for my family than for myself. Other Russians here told me 'Oh, forget your sisters - you're separate forever - it's another planet.' But I didn't believe it. Deep in my heart I just felt that something's going to change."

Despite the sadness she felt about her country's predicament and the sense of loss at being separated from her family, Alfia gradually pulled her life back together. This was far from easy. She was hampered not

only by anonymity outside her native country and her inability to speak English (a fact very clear to me when I first met her in 1981) but also - and rather importantly for a cellist! - by the lack of an instrument to play on.

Alfia continues the story: "Through my friend Ivo Pogorelich (who came to London at about the same time as I did) I met Yehudi Menuhin. All I had at the time was a cheap factory instrument. Menuhin said straight away, 'You need a good cello!' and there, on the spot, rang a well known London violin shop which was able to lend me a nice instrument for a while. Following this, I met a very generous music lover who bought a lovely cello for my use." Then the impossible happened.

"I had always cherished the dream of our trio being together again and made many efforts for us to be re-united. Gradually, the situation developed in Russia that finally allowed my family to come here to the UK. We were overjoyed. After a month of rehearsal we had our South Bank debut in December 1989."

Several years later, in June of 1996, in a truly satisfying turn around of events the Bekova Trio was finally invited to return to Russia to give a series of concerts. Back in their home country of Kazakhstan they were given a hero's welcome.

In recent years the trio has gone from strength to strength. Perhaps their most natural inclination is towards the Russian repertoire but despite this they have also made outstanding recordings of other composers from the likes of Schubert to Martinu. The Martinu album was in fact chosen by the *BBC Classical Music Magazine* as one of the best CDs of 1998.



Left to right: Alfia, Eleonora & Elvira

One of their more interesting recordings is the transcription made by the Bekova sisters themselves of one of Mussorgsky's most imaginative works, *Pictures at an Exhibition*. As a boy I used to listen to Ravel's orchestral arrangement of this piece excitedly from an old '78' record whilst doing my best to follow it from the piano score. Hearing it again, and in such an original form, brought back all the sensation for me of hearing it for the very first time.

Alfia's own career, apart from her obvious commitment to the trio and her solo work, has taken an unusual and fascinating turn in her formation in 1995 of "Cellorythmics". An exciting cello-led ensemble, together with jazz musician/composer husband

David Hughes, it combines such diverse influences as jazz and classical to rock and funk. I asked Alfia where she sees such diverse influences and the trio going in the new millennium.

"In terms of the trio, we are continuing recording with Chandos. Amongst other things, we plan to record some rarely performed works such as trios by the Spanish composers Granados, Turina and the outstanding 20th century cellist and composer Gaspar Cassado. As for myself, I intend to continue performing all six Bach cello suites in one recital as a tribute to the 250th anniversary of Bach's death next year as well as exploring the virtuoso possibilities of the instrument through works such as the Paganini Caprices. With Cellorythmics I am really inspired. It gives a new angle on how I view Bach, for instance. It's very fresh for me."

And that is what sums up Alfia's attitude to life. That no matter what the obstacles, your deepest dream can become reality if you dare to believe in it.

A.W.

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- | | |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------|
| D. Peccatte (vn) | E. Sartory (vn) |
| A. Lamy (vn) see Page 1 | A. Vigneron (vn) |
| J. Tubbs (va) | T. Tubbs (va) |
| E. Sartory (ce) | A. Lamy (ce) |
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***Notes from the workshop** - to be continued in next issue.

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