



# Katy Woolley

## Principal Horn of the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra

Photo: David Elton

**Richard Steggall** meets one of the UK's greatest exports to discuss her move to Amsterdam, her philosophies, being a female role model and gaining inspiration from Marvel films

Principal Horn of the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. International Visiting Professor of Horn at the Royal Academy of Music. Former Principal Horn of the Philharmonia. Possibly the finest British horn player of her generation. Not bad for someone in her early 30s? Many of us have witnessed her glorious playing in orchestras and as a soloist, but surprisingly Katy has also had her fair share of setbacks, not that she would label them as such. They are merely opportunities for improvement.

Many horn players and teachers take a great interest in the psychological aspects of playing the horn. We know how we *should* think, how we *should* react to disappointment and how we *should* teach, so when you meet someone whose Zen-like approach manifests itself in happiness and positivity while simultaneously performing the high-wire act of being the first horn of one of the world's great orchestras, you sit up and listen. We can't all play like Katy Woolley (and she wouldn't want you to – she'd want you to play like YOU) but we can certainly learn from her.

**After seven years in the Philharmonia you left the orchestra to freelance for two years. Did you think it would be longer before you landed a new job?**

I didn't think anything. I didn't know if I wanted another job; I didn't know if I was good enough to get another job again. I just wanted to wait and see. I've always been lucky in knowing what potential I had but at that time I didn't know how to fulfil it. I think that's what I find most exciting about teaching – I love looking at people, analysing them and working out what their potential is to try to find ways to help them fulfil that. I don't think anyone should try to be anyone else, to be like Stefan Dohr or whoever. I think you need to see what you've got and make the absolute best of that. At the end of my time in the Philharmonia and as a freelancer I didn't know quite how to do that.

And then the Concertgebouw job came at the right time of my development – I was ready to have another roaming ground.

**You must have got to the point where you had done everything in London you could?**

In my third year of the Philharmonia, we recorded Holst's *The Planets* for an installation at the Science Museum. Members of the orchestra used to attend and one time this old lady asked me a couple of questions about the horn and who I was. I said that I was the orchestra's principal horn she asked how old I was. I was expecting, "Oh, well done you, how exciting!" but she said, "Isn't that really depressing?" I couldn't think how that could be depressing but then realised that it's because I'd have nowhere

else to go. Before then, I hadn't thought of that!

As far as my visions for the future, back then especially, job-getting was never my goal. Even at college it wasn't my primary goal, I only wanted to see how good I could be – to make the most of every opportunity that was given to me and every lesson that I had. I would never go out for a drink or to the pub the night before I had a lesson with Simon Rayner because I wanted to make the most of any information he could give me and any inspiration I could squeeze from him. Not so I could get a job but because I wanted to be good, and I knew that hopefully, if one fitted, then a job would follow.

Obviously I wanted to earn money and it's nice to play in orchestras but sitting in the Philharmonia doing all these lovely things and playing these great excerpts was secondary to just playing my best. That's not belittling it, I know how extraordinary it was and how lucky I was to be there but one of the reasons I left the Philharmonia was because I felt I wasn't fulfilling my responsibility to my colleagues – I wasn't playing well enough.

### **Your short freelance career included playing guest principal with the London Symphony Orchestra.**

Going into the LSO was incredibly educational because I found it so difficult. I always felt that I fitted well with the Philharmonia but the style and the way the LSO play, which is bigger and weightier, meant I felt like I didn't fit there. I thought my sound was too small so I was almost having to struggle playing but I liked finding it tricky so I could learn from being there. I was trying to make a bigger sound and constantly trying to make a sound that would fit and work with that orchestra.

### **You are the first person I have ever heard describe your sound as not big!**

Ha! It's extraordinarily different what's on the inside and what's on the outside. I think that's one of the reasons I had to quit the Philharmonia back then because of that self-doubt that I was feeling in myself all the time. It became really, really horrid sitting on stage. That's not so much now but I do think it's hard to get rid of the little seeds that we have from our past, that thing that maybe someone said once and it just settles on your mind. I pay less attention to it now, as I trust and am sure that my sound is just fine, but I do try every day to make that big sound – maybe it's being a girl. I don't want to be perceived as the girl with the small sound. Maybe there's something psychologically as well in that.

### **Obviously female horn players are still in a minority in the profession, so do you want to push the fact you're a woman forward or are you in the "I'm a horn player that just happens to be a woman" camp?**

I'm in both camps – I see both sides of the divide. I used to think, and still do fundamentally, that I don't want the fact that I'm a girl to have anything to do with it. I don't want to play the horn well "for a girl". One of the reasons I dress as I do onstage, I always wear trousers not dresses or skirts, is that I don't want to wear anything that a guy wouldn't. That's not because I don't want to be a girl, I want to be neutral. I don't want to distract from what I'm trying to do. I'm trying to say what the music's trying to say; I don't think it should have anything to do with

## FACT FILE

**Name:** Katy Woolley

**Age started horn:** 10

**Teachers:** Clare Hardy, Colin Stiff, Sue Dent, Simon Rayner, Christian-Friedrich Dallmann, Tim Brown

**First instrument:** One from the school cupboard... no idea!

**Current instrument:** Alexander 103

**Favourite composer for horn:** Brahms and Mahler

**Favourite composer to listen to:** Byrd

**Horn hero:** Impossible to say one. Vitaly Bujanovsky, Alan Civil, Dennis Brain, Stefan Dohr, all of my teachers above and too many colleagues to mention...

**Hobbies:** Swimming, walking, napping, looking at puppies on Instagram

**Job, if not a musician:** Ambulance driver

me. I think the beauty of the music is much more important than the person lucky enough to portray it.

At the same time, looking back, I do know I was inspired by Alison Balsom. Watching her play in a concert at Cadogan Hall was one of the first massive "click" moments for me: "Wait a minute, how did she get there?" At one stage she was my age and how did she jump from there to up there? Then I realised that's not how it works, it's not jumping from there to there, it's always you through all points. She is the same person she was ten years before and I'll be the same person in ten years' time, so I'll start doing it now. At the time I didn't think she was inspirational because she was a woman, but actually I think it was. Only very recently have I realised that it was because I could recognise myself in her although I think it was a bit of a luxury to not realise that at the time. I was lucky that Alison was there to do that to me.

### **You're obviously a great role model for young women entering the profession, particularly with your new job in Amsterdam. When did you move?**

I got the job in January 2019, moved in July and started in August. I did a year's probation which finished in the middle of last year.

### **And the audition and probation process is very different from our trial system?**

Yes, and I like that. It's short and sharp. All but the final audition rounds are behind a screen. You put as much effort into the audition as you want, you go and do it and then you know. In the UK you live in this doubt about what people think about you.

### **Was it just one day of auditions?**

Two days... well, it depends how far you get! (Three days for unknown players and students.) The first time I auditioned, five players got to the final, none of which got the job, but I didn't get through the first round which I was absolutely delighted by, actually. I've never been so utterly sure about what happened, what went wrong and therefore what I needed to do over the next year to try to fix it. I didn't know if I could but I knew I was going to try.

**Your story is very similar to Mark Almond's when he moved to San Francisco. Not getting a job the first time but knowing what you have to do in the year before trying again.**

Yes, we actually did some work together, some audition prep – it was great fun.

**I guess you both understood what had to be done. I know it's not quite that straightforward...**

Well now it does seem straightforward, I did it and it worked but when you're in it it's all a complete mystery. You sometimes wonder if the effort's worth it. In that year I only took on work 50% of the time so I could practise. That meant I was running very low on money and having to borrow from my little sister, Alice. She said that she was investing in me because she believed in me, which was really kind of her, but it could have been that I got to the end of that year, tried to audition and didn't get through again for whatever reason and then was in huge debt to my sister with no job.

**There would have been many players rejected from that first lot of auditions who would have resolved to work and try again the next year. But only one succeeded – you. What's the difference between you and the others?**

Easy. I watch Marvel films. You know in *Avengers: Endgame* when Dr. Strange... hang on you look confused.

**Erm...**

You don't watch Marvel films – what have you been doing in lockdown!? Oh my God, you'll have to start from the very beginning. OK, basically, I'm not going to tell you what happens in the whole of the Marvel series but Dr. Strange, who's the master of time, has the Time Stone and can kind of see through different aspects of time, there's this terrible thing going on when basically the whole universe is being destroyed by this big

god-like man and he's seen the future and someone turns round and says "are we going to win the war?" and he's like "there is one way out of, whatever it is, 700 billion and 39" and I like to think my chance of winning this job was like that. I had one chance in 792 billion, or whatever, but wouldn't it be really fun to find that one way. What is that one way? So, yep, I can't control how everyone else plays but I can try to play absolutely my best. If my best was right for them, then that's great but if it's not what the orchestra want then I would have been unhappy there anyway, that's also good. So in a way I thought it was a win-win situation, although I would owe my sister a lot of money and have no way to pay it back!

**Tell us about the horn section in Amsterdam?**

We've pretty much got a double section. I'm equal principal with Laurens Woudenburg. We divide up the programmes between us. We're always in reserve, so if we're not playing we always need to be ready in case the other principal is ill or something else happens.

**So no British style of bumping each other up or getting the third horn to do the concerto?**

No, it's very set. We very rarely share programmes, and we don't use bumpers that often. The third horn always plays third. It's just a nicer and clearer system.

**With the new distancing rules you're very spread out across the stage. Have you got used to that?**

Yes, weirdly I have. Generally I don't like to think of anything as "difficult" or "hard". I like to think of it as a challenge that's there to try to overcome. When we started spreading out, I thought, well this is going to be different. Let's not try to compare it to anything, it's just how it is. We're going to have to do it in a different way, so instead of listening to the cellos, for example, I had to look at them instead, so now we have this amazing communication between people in the room which you didn't have

to the same extent before. I think it's a rather beautiful thing and also really helpful because now I'm watching the cellos with the beautiful flowing things that they do with their hands and bodies and I'm thinking I could play more like that. Playing more with them visually helps you play with a better flow, and I've used that to inspire my practice. It's brought up some interesting opportunity for development.

**So you accept the challenge and take everything that goes with it.**

Exactly. Instead of mulling over the negatives you look



Katy in action with the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra

for where there might be a hidden benefit. (I say in a very privileged position of having a secure job, I'm fortunate to say that.)

**How's life in Amsterdam?**

I'm renting from a retired double bass player from the orchestra, it's a flat about ten minutes' cycle away, which is extraordinary being that close. Just nipping outside, getting on your bike and being there in ten minutes is just heaven.

**What do you miss about London?**

Not the commuting! What I really miss is the sessions, not in terms of doing them themselves but sitting next to such great horn players. Sitting down in a line playing unison with these huge sounds and huge, amazing personalities and players with such experience as well meant I learnt so much. Often when I'm sitting down to practise, I think about how those guys would play it: the body language, the sound, the bloom on the notes, it's extraordinary.

**When did you first go to London?**

Although I grew up in Exeter, I started going to Royal College of Music Junior department when I was 12. Saturday was my favourite day of the week.

**You were taught by Sue Dent. What did you learn at that age?**

I certainly didn't think too actively about my development. I loved the horn but didn't really do that much practice. I wasn't a horn geek but what Sue had instilled in me between the age of 12 and 18 was a dedication to beauty and a dedication to making the most of yourself and the piece in front of you. She showed thoughtfulness in a very kind way. I remember I had one lesson and then the next week she came back and said, "I've been thinking about this all week – I think we should try this..." Thinking that she cared about every tiny little detail of my playing obviously made a very strong impression on me.

One thing that she and Simon Rayner (my teacher at the senior RCM) massively share, which I absolutely love, is when they do a demonstration for anything they take this little bit of time and first almost ground themselves, have a think and then play. There's a respect for what's about to happen and a respect for the process and making the most of what it can be. Whether that consciously or subconsciously rubbed off on me I'm not sure, but I try to do the same.

**I always think of Sue as having such immaculate production.**

And the slurs! That's the same with Simon as well.

**Yes, is that the Royal College lineage?**

Yes, maybe it is it. I mean, they both learnt with Julian Baker. As far as Simon goes, I still haven't heard anyone else in my life who can play just one note and make it sound like a tune from an angel. Then he puts two together and I'm like, "How the \*\*\*\* do you do that?" And then three notes becomes a symphony somehow with Simon. The way he just moulds it together. You

want to eat it, and touch it, and hear it and smell it all at the same time. It's just so deeply beautiful.

**And there must be something in just spending time listening to them play.**

100%. Yes, having that as your weekly feed, then that's what you become. I was very, very fortunate to have both of those people.

**Do you think we'll ever see Katy Woolley as a soloist on a disc?**

In a way I'd love to record stuff and have CDs because the one annoying thing with my way is that it's fleeting. You do one thing and you feel, and hope, the moment was utterly glorious but then it's gone. In a way that's what makes me enjoy it more because if something doesn't go to plan that's part of the imperfection of it, and that's absolutely fine and how I move forward. I find "organicness" beautiful and that's what I enjoy about the world – the organic growth rather than structure, so I'd rather be in nature than the city.

When you're in a moment you don't know what that moment's going to mean necessarily. Something that seems bad can turn out to be extraordinary and lead to opportunities. Something that was painful can turn out to be the most amazing lesson while something that you thought would be life-changing turns out not to be. All you can ever do is make the most out of any situation so that's why I want to live in the moment.

**It's wonderful how clear you are on your philosophy, and from talking to you it seems to make you happy.**

Really happy! It's so nice; it's freeing but grounding.

**Do you do any meditation or yoga type thing?**

I think that my meditation is my horn playing. I think when I practise I'm meditating. I go off into a different space and it's my time to observe and take judgment away from the world. When I practise I don't think of things as bad or good.

I don't do yoga. I've got a yoga mat, does that count? Don't we all during lockdown?

**And how do you keep moving forward even when you hit the bumps?**

My greatest desire is not to be the world's greatest horn player or even to play in the greatest orchestra. I was given this body (for whatever reason, who knows why we're alive and why the world is here) with this physicality and this brain. I love playing the horn. How can I make the most of it? I want to get to my deathbed and not look back with regret that I hadn't worked a little bit harder and tried everything to see what my potential is. At the moment that's potential on the horn but in the future who knows what that's going to be? **RS**

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